FENG YU NIE

MISTAKENLY SAVING the VILLAIN

2

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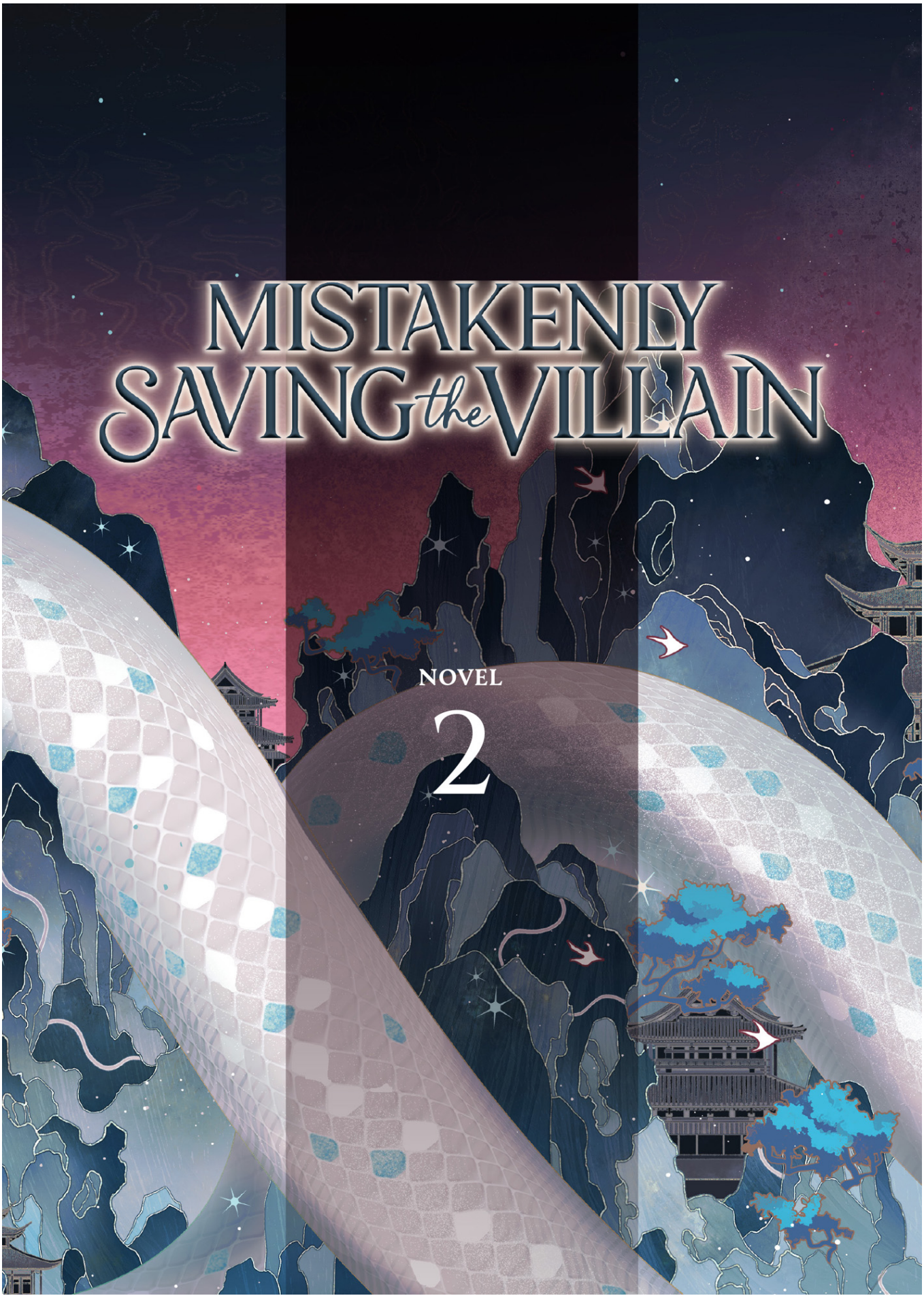
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NOVEL
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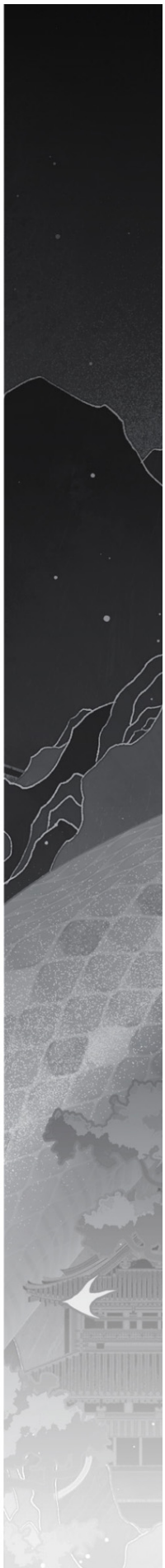

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Character Guide

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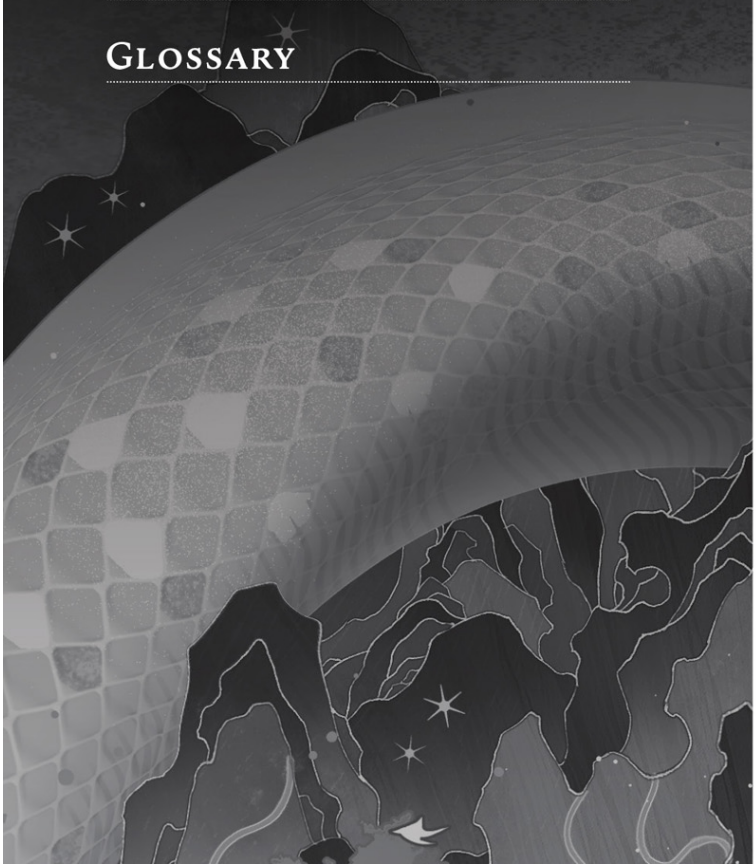


Chapter 33

SONG QINGSHI WALKED ATOP an endless sea of clouds, clad in a T-shirt and jeans. He looked around everywhere, searching for something. He knew what he sought, but he couldn't recall what it looked like. All he remembered was a ray of light more splendid than any other.

He forged onward, searching without end. Even if this sky stretched on forever, if he exhausted himself, if he fell to his knees again and again and had to crawl, if he lacked the strength to move…he did not want to stop.

From the clouds, another version of himself emerged: He wore thick, heavy, snow-white robes, and his soft, fine hair trailed down to the ground. He had the same face, the same cold demeanor, and he could comprehend the most arcane texts in the world, but not a single human emotion.

Because there was a void where his heart was supposed to be.

Song Qingshi suddenly knew what he had to do. He approached his other self, took out his own heart, and pressed it into the empty space.

As the heart and body united, the two souls shattered into countless tiny points of light, then recombined. They made up each other's flaws; the heart found its resting place, and the body regained its lost emotions. The puzzle was once again assembled. It transformed into a blank canvas that awaited bright washes of color.

Deep in the clouds, an eerie voice repeated a phrase that shook him to the depths of his soul:

"One thousand, three hundred, forty-nine…

"One thousand, three hundred, forty-nine…"

Song Qingshi jolted awake and realized he was in a pool of water. He wanted to get up, but the left side of his body wouldn't cooperate. As he floundered, he choked on

a mouthful of water. Someone next to him shot up, reached into the water, and steadied him by the waist. They pulled him from the water and gathered him, dripping wet, into their arms.

Those hands were unusually warm and covered in calluses. When the rough spots rasped Song Qingshi's delicate skin, they almost tingled.

The other person's heavy breaths stifled him a little, like the clouds at sea just before a storm. Their eyes glistened in the darkness as they stared at the long-sought prey that had finally returned to them. With each passing second, they seemed more and more dangerous.

Song Qingshi snuggled groggily into those grasping arms, heedless of when or where he was. After some time, his head cleared enough for him to realize something was wrong—then, that feeling dissipated at once.

Luminous pearls sparked one by one and chased the darkness away, revealing Yue Wuhuan's pretty face. That bright, mesmerizing mole under his left eye was just the same as always, but in the pearls' light his molten gold eyes had darkened to a muddy black. Some imperceptible change to his gentle gaze had made his beauty even more pronounced.

Was it the light? Why did Yue Wuhuan feel like an entirely different person?

Song Qingshi realized he wasn't wearing clothing, and he'd dripped all over Yue Wuhuan. Longing for a change of clothes, he looked up from one embarrassment to find something even worse.

"Wuhuan. Why am I shorter?!" he croaked.

He'd been self-conscious about his youthful stature to begin with, so he normally wore oversized robes to hide it. Those robes, combined with his height, preserved a little of his dignity. He remembered he was around the same height as Yue Wuhuan when the tribulation lightning had struck him, so why after waking was he half a head shorter? Was…was shrinking a negative side effect of failing a tribulation?

Song Qingshi's heart shattered. He felt too ashamed to show his face ever again.

Yue Wuhuan's lips twitched as he smothered his reaction to Song Qingshi's devastated expression. He wanted to laugh, but he couldn't, so he just lifted his lips a little.

"Zunzhu, you've slept for ten years…"

"Ten years?" Song Qingshi was stunned. "Then m-my…"

"Your mice are fine," said Yue Wuhuan. "They've been well taken care of, and they've bred many times."

Song Qingshi's panic receded. Looking around again, he realized this was a familiar place: the secret room beneath his chambers, just redecorated with clothing chests and a simple table. Some unfinished writing and several large mountains of books sat atop it.

Song Qingshi shifted his body, and his toes made contact with a wet bamboo pillow on the floor.

Wuhuan probably slept here.

But how could this place have been a decent bedroom? Or study?

"Have you rested properly all these years?" Song Qingshi couldn't help but ask.

Yue Wuhuan chuckled. "Don't worry. I don't sleep here much."

When he slept, it was only because he'd passed out.

The bed looked undisturbed. Song Qingshi scrutinized Yue Wuhuan but didn't detect any lies. Something about him seemed strange, but Song Qingshi couldn't tell what, so he let it go for now.

He took stock of himself and noticed his burns had healed. He'd drawn on all his power to seal away his flames of the underworld, so his new, unused meridians felt dry and a little painful. After so long without speech, his throat felt stiff. His fingers were numb, too, and they'd need physical therapy to recover.

Overall, somehow, there were no major issues.

Song Qingshi recalled Yue Wuhuan's tribulation and concluded in disbelief, "You cured me?"

A novice medic shouldn't have been able to manage it. Injuries suffered from tribulations were always severe and complicated; it was a miracle he'd managed to survive. He'd hoped at the time that his injuries weren't as grievous as he imagined; that Yue Wuhuan could save his life with the treasury's precious medicines; and then he could deal with the rest once he woke. But Yue Wuhuan had far exceeded his expectations.

"I failed again and again," said Yue Wuhuan. Fiery red vines extended behind him to nimbly open one of the clothing chests. He retrieved a crisp inner robe and brought it over to Song Qingshi. "I read every book in the library, tried so many different treatments, then managed to create a regeneration pill two years ago. I melted it and mixed it together with bloodflower powder to mend your physical wounds. But you still didn't wake…so I studied more and noticed that your soul hadn't melded well within you. I used acupuncture with soul-fusion elixir to consolidate it.

"Now, you're finally awake…"

"Thank you." Song Qingshi was an experienced apothecary, and he knew it was deceptively difficult to create such medicine. He was in the middle of searching for ways to praise his little angel when he noticed the vines next to him. He blinked, unable to believe his eyes. "Bloodking vines?"

Bloodking vines were a rare fire-elemental plant possessed of basic intelligence that only grew in extremely hot locations. A fully grown specimen could blanket an entire mountain and swallow all the flora and fauna on it, sucking their blood and devouring their souls. After destroying the life in a three-mile radius, it would wither and die. However, its aggressive survival strategy doomed it; it had gone extinct eons ago. Occasionally, you'd find weapons made from bloodking vines on the market, but they were made from dead specimens and weren't very strong.

"It won't harm you, Zunzhu." Yue Wuhuan's vines put the inner robe on Song Qingshi, then Yue Wuhuan bent to tie the waist for him. "I stumbled over this little

sprout in a secret realm. It lost its body long ago, and its soul had been sealed in a barrier. Since it seemed to want to get close to me, I tried to absorb it into my own soul. I didn't expect to succeed, though."

This method had been recorded in ancient tomes, and many had sought to reproduce it, but there was only one successful case: an ancient, anonymous immortal.

Yue Wuhuan didn't make rash decisions. Enduring heavenly thunder beyond his cultivation level had granted him strength greater than the average cultivator's, but he'd still taken quite a risk. Even yuanying-level cultivators would hesitate to attempt such a thing unless they had no other choice.

Song Qingshi had a head full of questions, but he didn't know where to start, nor if he would receive truthful answers. Too many things could happen in ten years. He decided to slowly discover the truth for himself after he got out of the water.

But he'd only taken one step when he lost his balance. The left side of his body hung limp and useless, and he couldn't exert enough force to walk. He tottered forward, but Yue Wuhuan caught him in his arms.

Song Qingshi knew this part of his recovery was temporary, but the absence of sensation took him back to his past life and his gradual loss of control over his body. He wasn't afraid of pain, but he was terrified of that familiar numbness.

Despite his fear, he didn't dare say anything. Yue Wuhuan had done so much and worried enough. Song Qingshi hated to burden him with his own issues. Nevertheless, he couldn't let go of Yue Wuhuan's collar.

The more anxious Song Qingshi felt, the tenser he grew, and the greater his fear. His muscles, long starved of spiritual power, twitched and convulsed.

Noticing his state, Yue Wuhuan picked him up and marched out of the secret room.

Song Qingshi's chambers looked the same, and the sheets of his clean, well-kept bed smelled like familiar medicinal herbs. Yue Wuhuan set him down carefully, directing a vine to fetch a jade hairpin to massage the meridians on the tops of Song Qingshi's feet.

"It's all right. Take a deep breath and relax… You haven't moved in so long, this is normal, but you'll recover in no time. I'll massage your hands and feet several times a day. It'll take half a month at most before you're moving just as before."

"Mm." Song Qingshi's ears burned, and he wanted to bury his face in the blankets like an ostrich.

"Doctors can't treat themselves, Zunzhu. Don't…don't worry."

Yue Wuhuan wanted to say *Don't be embarrassed*, didn't he? Song Qingshi's reddened ears darkened in color.

“B-but I’ve always taken care of myself when I get injured,” he rushed to explain, stumbling over his words. Without friends to rely on in this world, he’d cared for everything himself. “Really! O-once, in a secret realm, I lost an arm and had to reattach it and sew up the wounds myself. I’m not afraid of pain!”

This was just an unusual situation. He was usually very strong, very manly! Sure, he’d sniffle a bit if he got hurt, but he definitely stayed cool and handled everything before crying…

Yue Wuhuan paused his ministrations and looked up. “But now that I’m here, you don’t *need* to take care of it yourself.”

Song Qingshi considered that for a long time before he assented.

“All right.”

Yue Wuhuan didn’t speak again, focusing on helping Song Qingshi relax his muscles instead. A floral fragrance drifted through the window on a cool breeze, and the world fell silent, troubled only by the sound of their breathing.

Song Qingshi looked at the man before him and finally understood what had changed: his temperament. Yue Wuhuan had been like a lush, gorgeous blossom hiding a few thorns. Now, he had become a honed blade—one with razor-sharp intent.

After Song Qingshi’s nerves passed, his spasms did too. He wiggled his fingers. They seemed fine, so he tried not to think about the lingering numbness. He would leave physical therapy for later.

Then Yue Wuhuan’s beautiful face reminded Song Qingshi of something important. “How have you managed to travel about all these years? Has it been hard? I don’t mean anything untoward, it’s just…there are plenty of bad actors in the immortal realm. I’ve almost been kidnapped myself by fools who think they can push me around because of how I look.”

That kind of thing happened to Song Qingshi often, actually. He’d get one foot out the door before some hooligan tried to drug him or kidnap him to sell him off. His

situation only improved after he established a reputation for dealing cruelly with those bastards.

"Zunzhu, you're a pure water elemental. That's why you're always suffering that sort of attack," Yue Wuhuan said.

Over the course of treatment, Yue Wuhuan had realized that Song Qingshi was a water elemental, despite the two fires he had hidden within. Said element helped him control the fires, and in combination with his poisons, it gave him a unique constitution. However, in most cultivators' eyes, pure water elementals were weak when it came to battle. They rarely became strong cultivators, and they were most useful for dual cultivation or transformation into a top-quality vessel. Had Song Qingshi been a little weaker and easier to control, a terrible fate would've awaited him—not death, but a hell like Yue Wuhuan's.

"Zunzhu, no one can know about your spiritual roots." Murderous disgust filled Yue Wuhuan at the mere thought of evil cultivators daring to sully Song Qingshi. "Don't agree to be anyone's life partner or dual cultivate with them, no matter their sweet talk."

Song Qingshi nodded earnestly, though he didn't know what his spiritual roots had to do with finding a life partner. Where was the problem? He'd already spent a thousand years without anyone attempting to pursue him.

His seniors at school had joked that a nerd like him—who only read textbooks, answered practice questions, and performed experiments—would never find a girlfriend. Even if he'd been perfectly healthy, it was out of reach.

He'd been a little dejected at the time. If he found someone special, he'd simp even harder than his seniors! Getting hot water, buying breakfast, handing over his paychecks—he'd do it all!

Song Qingshi rarely went out and didn't understand the ulterior motives of others. Hoping to preserve Song Qingshi's innocence a little longer, Yue Wuhuan decided he'd save teaching him for the future.

Instead, he answered Song Qingshi's previous question. "I learned the Frozen Jade and Antidote techniques at your recommendation and sealed poison in my body."

He activated the poison, and countless ghastly splotches stained the upper half of his face. They covered his forehead, nose, and cheeks, ringed his eyes, and even obscured his eye-catching mole. The bottom half of his face retained its color, but the contrast only magnified the tragic loss of his beauty.

"Ghost snake poison?" Song Qingshi reeled in surprise.

"Mhm, I was inspired by the way you suppressed your fires," Yue Wuhuan said, smiling. "I used an extract of ghost snake venom and a few other medicines. It appears at will. It looks frightful, but it saves me a lot of trouble when I'm handling business. Once the news spreads far and wide that Wuhuan-gongzi's face has been ruined, I'll be even safer."

Song Qingshi couldn't help but reach out to touch the marks. Under his fingertips, Yue Wuhuan's skin was still very smooth—just like before.

Yue Wuhuan let the poison spread, then chuckled. "If anyone doubts I'm really poisoned and harbors ill intentions toward me, I just need to release the poison completely. It then spreads across my entire body, dispelling any interest."

Song Qingshi's heart ached, but he had to agree: Yue Wuhuan had found a simpler solution than donning a disguise. When something beautiful was ruined, it inspired people's pity. They would stop mentioning his past humiliations to his face, if nothing else. But he'd still face people's fear, disgust, and judgment. Could anyone bear such malice?

Yue Wuhuan noticed Song Qingshi's concern and retracted the poison, unveiling his beautiful face once more. "I don't care about my looks. In fact, people are more likely to see my other qualities if I don't have them. But I didn't destroy them, Zunzhu, because I was afraid you'd worry." His phoenix eyes turned gentle. "If you like this face of mine, I'll save it for only you to see, all right?"

A red vine coiled around Song Qingshi's foot and tugged it a little, as though cajoling him.

"All right! Wuhuan is still the most beautiful!" Song Qingshi declared.

Yue Wuhuan's smile dazzled.

He rose and changed out of his wet clothes into a set of red cotton robes, tied with a thin golden belt to accentuate his waist. After years of swords practice, he stood straight as a poplar tree, no longer as delicate as before. One of his vines fetched a brocade box, and inside was a gold mask. A pair of asymmetrical wings unfolded from either side of his intricate disguise, and red, woven ribbon strung with three delicate, glittering gems dangled from the left.

He swept back his long hair but for a few stray curls, and put on the mask. It obscured wherever the poison would've appeared, and in tandem with his luscious lips and light, honey-gold chin, it lent his beauty a bold and domineering air. His aggressive eyes were hard to look away from.

"What a pretty mask," Song Qingshi said sincerely.

The corners of Yue Wuhuan's mouth lifted again; he was pleased. "Since you're awake, I can't embarrass you when I go out, can I?"

He'd deliberately controlled the poison so that it only affected half his face because of how Song Qingshi would react upon waking. Courting male birds always paraded their best plumage to impress the bird of their dreams. He didn't want his beloved to see his ugliness. Only his good side was worthy of Song Qingshi.

Song Qingshi relaxed, assured of Yue Wuhuan's consideration down to the most minute detail, and turned to another topic that concerned him. "How's the Medicine King's Valley doing?"

"Everything's fine, except for one pressing issue." Yue Wuhuan motioned for a red vine to bring a thick sheaf of letters. "An Long wrote these. Take a look."

Song Qingshi shuffled through the stack. At first, An Long wrote once every two or three months—normal greetings. He also sent all kinds of gifts and spoke of interesting developments in his life. Five years later, he started to question Song Qingshi's failure to respond, and his letters grew in frequency. He seemed to have

guessed that something had happened to Song Qingshi, and harshly questioned Yue Wuhuan about his whereabouts.

In the last half year, he'd often threatened Yue Wuhuan with dismemberment.

"He thought you were angry at first, or in isolation to create medicine," Yue Wuhuan said with a note of exasperation. "Later, I went out to collect various remedies and reorganize the valley, which drew his suspicion. I tried to drag things out and placate him, but he kept questioning me, so I had to respond. In the end, he pieced together some clues from the medicines I purchased and caught wind that I took over the valley. He thinks you've been gravely injured or killed, and I've stolen your power. This can't go on any longer, so thank goodness you're awake to respond to him yourself."

Song Qingshi's horror grew the further he read. "Does he intend to force his way in?"

"He's already tried twice," Yue Wuhuan said. "The poisonous fog and the maze array to the west have mostly been destroyed. I can fix them, but the Poison King has some powerful tricks up his sleeve. I doubt I can stop his next attempt."

The arrays required many spiritual crystals, and the Alaskan malamute had destroyed almost all of them. Song Qingshi's lips twitched from the loss, but he couldn't fault Yue Wuhuan for concealing his condition.

If this situation wasn't Yue Wuhuan's fault, was it An Long's? But *of course* An Long had resorted to something as stupid as nearly destroying the valley when he'd assumed the worst. It wasn't his fault either…

Whom could Song Qingshi blame? Only himself. It was his fault for passing out so quickly, without leaving any instructions.

Good thing he could still use his right hand. He would write to An Long with an explanation straight away.

The Medicine King's Valley's coffers had little change to spare. They couldn't afford another siege from An Long.

Chapter 34

SONG QINGSHI GRIPPED his brush and agonized over how to write to An Long for a very long time.

He was a STEM student. He could expound on scientific theory, the results of an experiment, or academic debate for thousands of words, but when he tried to express his feelings, his writing came out drier than a work e-mail or clinical reports. Normally, the letters he wrote to An Long were either about research or experiments…

After a brain-racking eternity he opened with *An Long, my friend,* and explained that a lightning strike had seriously injured him, and Yue Wuhuan had no choice but to conceal it. He glossed over the tribulation and instead emphasized Yue Wuhuan's immediate, clearheaded efforts to save his life, with thick brush strokes on the words *saved my life* in case a certain someone pretended to have missed it. Then he thanked An Long for his concern, asked him to stop destroying the poison arrays, and told him to come through the main entrance like a normal person.

Song Qingshi checked over the letter a few times after he was done before asking Yue Wuhuan if anything needed to be added.

There were no mistakes, so Song Qingshi slid the letter into the envelope. Thinking about those wasted spiritual crystals, though, made his chest tighten. He exacted revenge by drawing a little Alaskan malamute head next to An Long's name on the envelope, satisfied he wouldn't understand its significance.

Yue Wuhuan chuckled at Song Qingshi's scribble. "Zunzhu, you sure are good friends with An-xianzun."

He'd long since noticed that Song Qingshi and An Long treated each other differently from other people. Even though they fought, they had a much stronger bond than what Yue Wuhuan had first imagined. An Long had attacked the Medicine King's Valley like a madman after he'd realized something had happened to Song Qingshi. Yue

Wuhuan had exploited the valley's terrain and used its arrays to his advantage to lay traps, but he'd barely held back An Long's fury.

Meanwhile, Song Qingshi hadn't noticed that no matter how much they fought, the most he could begrudge An Long was a silly nickname. Song Qingshi had never gotten truly angry at him.

What an unpleasant realization that had been for Yue Wuhuan.

"You two must be close, huh?" Yue Wuhuan asked with a small smile.

"I'm not sure." Song Qingshi considered the question; even though the original's memories melded with his, the answer remained at large.

Yue Wuhuan seemed to be very curious about this, so Song Qingshi tried his best to explain. "I've had two spiritual fires inside me from birth. I lost control of them sometimes, before I established my foundation. Especially the flames of the underworld. I hurt people too easily."

In his youth, he'd been adopted by a kind old apothecary. The pair lived in deep in the mountains, far from civilization, where they grew medicinal herbs. When the old apothecary died, Song Qingshi studied and cultivated on his own. By the time he established a foundation and learned to control his spirit fires, he'd devoured the library at home. He longed to see the things described in his books, and on gathering his courage, descended the mountain to take on the world below.

He was plain, then, and so skinny his hollow cheeks distorted his face. His eyes looked tremendous, and his hair lay limp as straw. He could never seem to say what he wanted. Thanks to that and his odd appearance, no one dared approach him.

After so long bearing the weight of their judgment, he spared them the nuisance and kept to himself.

He cultivated a golden core after receiving the Medicine King's knowledge. He took care of himself, and lost some of his gawkiness. People started seeking him for his medical expertise, but all their talk of beauty—people, scenery, things—confounded him, and he did the same, baffling them with incomprehensible medical jargon.

They walked different paths. No need for him to force them to cater to him. He was happy to swim the vast sea of knowledge alone.

"Everyone thought I was weird," Song Qingshi said, embarrassed. "But An Long was weird too. He liked bugs and always carried an assortment with him. I found them fascinating, but everyone else seemed frightened, and they never spoke to him either. One day, we met in a secret realm. He tried to scare me with a bug, but I noticed it had potential medical value, so I asked him about it out of curiosity. We had a little chat and he ended up begging me to let him visit the Medicine King's Valley. I agreed."

Yue Wuhuan listened intently.

Song Qingshi found it funny, in retrospect. "I spent a lot of time alone, so I had a hard time speaking. I could muddle my way through poison or medical theory, but I never had the right words for anything else. It felt nearly impossible to communicate with people. But An Long's very smart, so he always understood what I intended to say. After we grew closer, he started provoking me more. Sometimes he'd play dumb until I got so mad I cursed at him. I remember I once screamed at him for an hour without breaks… Now I'm much better at speaking coherently. I suspect he's doing it on purpose, but he'll never admit to that. Perhaps I'm just overthinking things."

"An-xianzun is fascinating," Yue Wuhuan said.

"Yes, and he keeps an eye out for rare ingredients and news from all over, then takes me to forage. He also taught me how to spot someone trying to trick me, not to mention how to scare them off."

Having said all that, Song Qingshi feared Yue Wuhuan might think he'd taken advantage of An Long's kindness. "I also give him the weirdest, most interesting bugs or bug-related paraphernalia that I find. I've taught him a lot about medicine, compounded them for him, and I help him when he needs it."

"Yes, Zunzhu, you're the best." Yue Wuhuan chuckled. *To the point that I want to eat you up,* he thought.

Song Qingshi blushed from Yue Wuhuan's compliment.

“I didn’t have any friends before. I don’t really know how I *should* interact. Everyone said An Long and I were the Weird Duo. So… I guess we’re pretty good friends?”

It was the sole reason that no matter how angry he was, he never considered burning that Alaskan malamute at the stake. If he hit An Long too hard, he’d patch him up afterward.

Yue Wuhuan noticed his phrasing. “Before?”

“Now I have Wuhuan as well!”

Yue Wuhuan was his favorite. He was beautiful, smart, gentle, considerate, kind, and well-behaved, understood everything Song Qingshi said, and never got mad at him or angered him. He was flawless.

The curve of Yue Wuhuan’s smile turned even more enchanting.

“We’re good friends?”

It occurred to Song Qingshi that he shouldn’t assume so without consulting Yue Wuhuan. “Is that…all right?”

“Of course.” Yue Wuhuan’s vine curled around Song Qingshi’s foot and pulled gently. The mask focused his stare, but ambiguity tinted his tone. “We both feel the same way for you.”

Song Qingshi’s heart raced under Yue Wuhuan’s gaze. He perceived some discomfort in his yuanying, and he silently recited theories of pathology to steady himself.

On waking, he’d realized there was something seriously wrong with his yuanying, and his progress toward the next level of cultivation had been interrupted. Not only had he stalled, he actually lost progress. After eliminating other causes, he suspected a flaw caused by his method of cultivation.

In this world, he occupied a body without a heart, so he’d chosen to cultivate emptiness; in the absence of desire, no emotion could trouble him. He hadn’t panicked

since he'd begun cultivating the path of emptiness, not even when his experiments resulted in nothing eight hundred times over.

He'd initially suspected that he'd fallen for Yue Wuhuan—a man's love and his desires tended to grow hand in hand—but he was certain he had no such thoughts. Not a single one. He feared triggering Yue Wuhuan's trauma and setting him back, after all.

Song Qingshi's next logical conclusion was that he'd experienced too many turbulent emotions since his first meeting with Yue Wuhuan, and it had affected his cultivation.

He mulled it over before activating his Frozen Jade technique. To protect his yuanying and prevent further loss, he diverted some of the spiritual power checking his flames of the underworld. He'd ration his spiritual power to prevent his dantian from withering. That way, he wouldn't endanger his cultivation with his unstable emotions. He'd figure the rest out later. Yuanying cultivators lived long lives; he had plenty of days ahead of him. Among the residents of the immortal realm, his patience was top-notch.

His silence troubled Yue Wuhuan. "Zunzhu, is there something wrong?"

Song Qingshi shook his head, smiling. He summoned a messenger bird for An Long's letter, then watched it whisk away.

As the bird disappeared into the distance, Song Qingshi remembered he'd never settled the matter of Xie Que's former pupils.

"They were terrified of being turned into vessels, and most chose to go home after learning how hard it was to become immortal." Yue Wuhuan gave a small laugh. "As long as they're smart about it, they'll have a happy life in the mortal realm, between the little cultivation they have and the immortal pills. Six of them didn't want to go back, or they didn't have homes to return to. I let them stay. They've learned medicine here in the valley, along with a few talented servants. There're thirty students, give or take, and a few of them really excel. They could be laboratory assistants, Zunzhu."

Song Qingshi was overjoyed. He wasn't good at teaching, so he had to do most things himself in the lab. It was very time-consuming. He'd only realized how difficult

it'd been after he had Yue Wuhuan to help. He'd wanted to start classes ages ago and train a few clever assistants, but he hadn't gotten around to it before his long convalescence.

Yue Wuhuan had exacting standards. If he said they were talented, then they'd exceed Song Qingshi's expectations. He was happy to push An Long to the back of his mind, so he decided to observe the class.

"Zunzhu, it's springtime. You'll get chilly."

Yue Wuhuan brought out a set of cultivation robes that'd he'd had copied from Song Qingshi's old favorites, then draped a luxurious white fox-fur cloak over his shoulders.

Song Qingshi admired the fire-repelling array on the garment, delightedly scrunching handfuls of the soft fur. He might not have been afraid of the cold, but he still preferred staying warm. He had no idea when his little angel had discovered that secret.

He formed a large red lotus from his fated fire, then the two of them stepped on the lotus and slowly flew out of Song Qingshi's chambers.

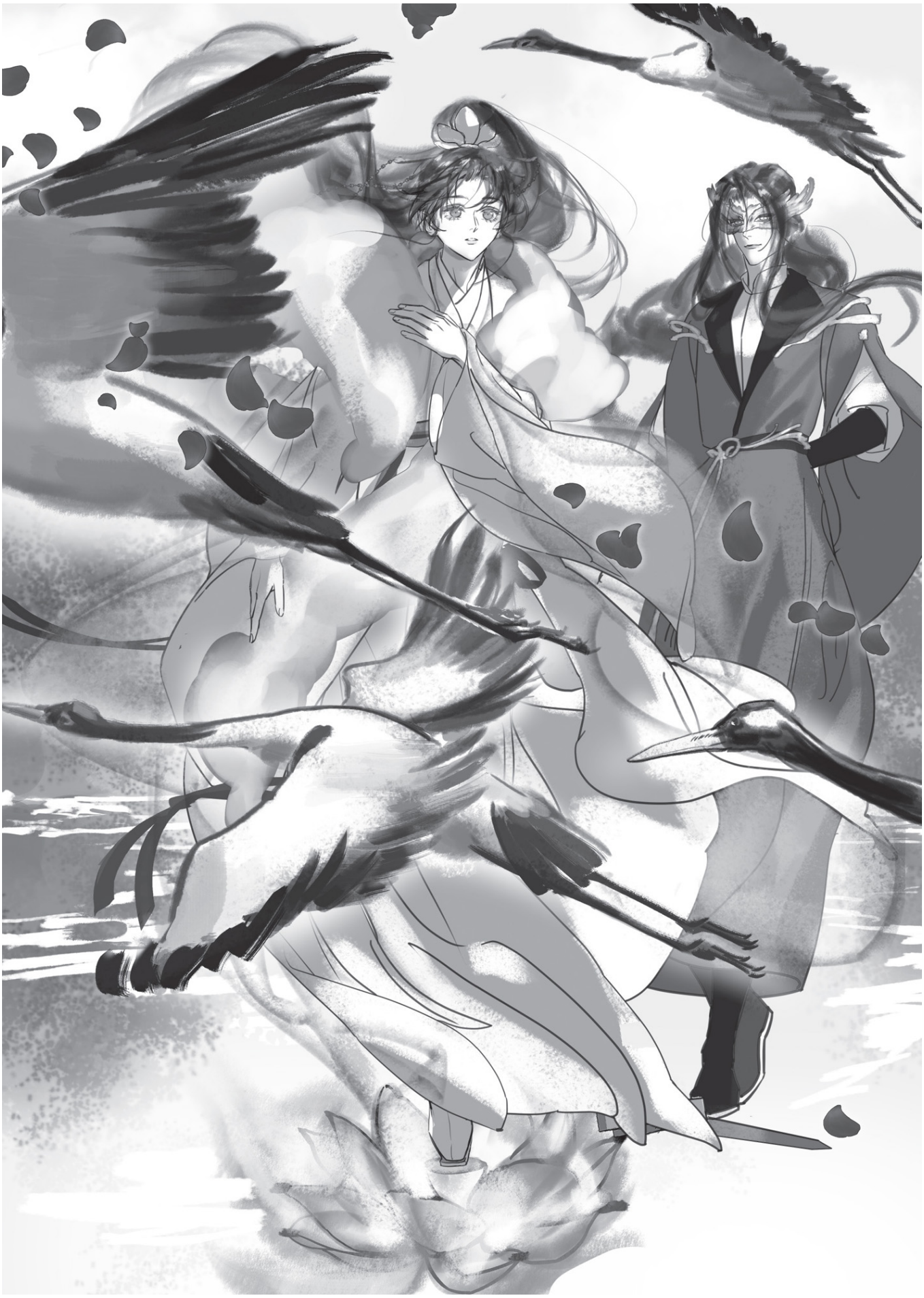
A scene he'd never seen unfolded before his eyes: a rainbow of flowers that replaced the random trees he'd peppered around his yard in the past. Delicate vines of wisteria draped down, peonies bloomed lush and captivating, and a riot of blossoms swelled in the orchard: peach, pear, apricot. Almost all the loveliness and colors of spring had been tastefully gathered together, forming a perfect painting. There had only been a few koi fish in the pond, but now cranes and mandarin ducks lined the shore. They coiled their necks around each other, quacking and squawking.

Song Qingshi searched for the *Fuling Palace* plaque in astonishment. These couldn't be his grounds!

"Because the Medicine King's Valley needed urgent repairs and we had to accommodate the new arrivals, I elected to redesign the garden," Yue Wuhuan said. "But if you don't like it, Zunzhu…I can return it to its original state."

"I like it," Song Qingshi assured him. "It's incredible!"

An evil sect had originally occupied the Medicine King's Valley, but Song Qingshi had discovered them testing medicine on children. He destroyed them in disgust. Then he saw the terrain was well suited to growing medicinal herbs, and the sect had plenty of cauldrons for his elixirs and pills, so he just stayed. Over time, it had transformed into "his" valley.



The previous sect had built most of the structures. The ones that he'd added later had been made as efficiently as possible, and even their names had been perfunctory. He'd never considered aesthetics. He was a scientist, not a designer.

But that didn't mean he disliked pretty things. He wore white because it lengthened his silhouette and made him seem less slender, but he loved bright and lively colors. The flamboyant courtyard before his eyes dazzled him; he was happy with every square inch of it.

Yue Wuhuan noted Song Qingshi's appreciative gaze with hungry satisfaction, licking his lips that had turned dry from desire.

Just like that…those clear eyes would slowly fill with all the pieces of Yue Wuhuan.

Until he drew them by habit. Until they were a natural part of his life.

They would never part again.

Chapter 35

YUE WUHUAN HAD ESTABLISHED the new classroom outside the peach grove, further from the labs but adjacent to new storage. It was stocked with medicines prescribed in both the immortal and mortal realms for the students to use. Yue Wuhuan kept the lethal poisons and precious medicinal herbs in the original storage room and dispensed them only as permitted.

Next to the medicine storage was the library. Over the prior decade, Yue Wuhuan had doubled the collection of books. There were plenty of basic cultivation texts, foundational medical theory manuals, and other miscellaneous tomes. Song Qingshi felt reluctant to leave, engrossed in a copy of *Strange Tales of Spiritual Fires*.

"I chose these books for the curriculum. They're good for beginners, not a lot of harmful content." Yue Wuhuan smiled and put the books in Song Qingshi's arms, signalling that he could take them to review. "Zunzhu, you're well-versed in both medicine and poisons, but everyone else needs to hone themselves here for a few years while I examine their character and conduct. After that, they're allowed to handle more precious and dangerous components."

Song Qingshi agreed. He was generous and more than ready when it came to teaching others about medicine, but he didn't want his knowledge of poisons to fall into the wrong hands. Keeping poison out of the basic curriculum felt right. He was obligated to pass on his knowledge, but he needed to assess his students before he imparted anything dangerous. Some substances he trusted only himself and Yue Wuhuan to handle.

Yue Wuhuan cast a spell, and something strange lurched out of the grove, all unfocused eyes and stiff movements. Song Qingshi knew a corpse when he saw one.

"You made a poison puppet?" he asked, astonished.

Poison puppets were created from dead bodies. Controlling them required a complicated array, so they weren't made often. They had the power of a mere

foundation-level cultivator, but they were filled with toxins, and a single touch from one could kill. On destruction, they burst into bloody, poisonous clouds. Song Qingshi had hidden these and other protections throughout the valley as trump cards. Otherwise, one yuanying-level cultivator and his crew of foundation-level servants couldn't have protected the precious resources in the Medicine King Valley from the immortal realm's many thieves.

But the puppet before them had not been created by Song Qingshi. It was covered in the same poison as Song Qingshi's, but its control was much more precise, and it concealed many more traps and weapons. It was vicious, stacked with layer on layer of offensive abilities.

"I found your notes on the creation process in your lab," Yue Wuhuan said, afraid that Song Qingshi would scold him. "After you passed out, the puppets you'd created collapsed and couldn't be repaired, so the valley had lost one of its defenses. I took a few intact bodies from the dissection room and tried to create new ones. It took a lot of work, but I did it. Your notes weren't complete, so I had to fill in parts of the array myself. It's a little different, now."

Song Qingshi thought about his messy notes, where he just wrote down whatever came to mind, and stumbled to commend Yue Wuhuan. "G-good job on the improvements! How many did you make?"

"Sixty-four. Most are hidden within the poisonous mist, there's a few guarding the treasury and the labs, and some of the more innocuous-looking ones stay in interspatial pouches. I bring them as protection when I'm out."

Before the bloodking vines, he couldn't hold his own against other cultivators. He had to think outside the box.

"There are eighty-two arrays on those puppets! They're all incredibly complicated. Each one is different, and you can't omit a single line. How did you make so many?" Song Qingshi asked, unable to hide his astonishment.

"If I've drawn it once, I'll never make a mistake."

Song Qingshi felt dizzy upon hearing that. He'd invented the poison puppets by combining multiple arrays, and he *still* made frequent mistakes when he drew them thanks to his less-than-nimble hands. Each success followed four or five failed attempts, and it felt like a chore, so he'd only made the twenty or so sufficient for his needs.

He snuck a glance at his own good-for-nothing hands, then Yue Wuhuan's steady, agile ones. Song Qingshi was a little shaken to see the huge difference between the two.

Spells and arrays required a meticulous mind and steady hand. Yue Wuhuan was a great master in the making, sure to surpass his teacher one day. Realizing that, Song Qingshi grew pleased.

Yue Wuhuan had thoroughly studied the poison puppets these last few years. Song Qingshi's looked scary, but they weren't as deadly as they could be. So long as intruders didn't barge into the valley with evil intent, the puppets wouldn't harm them without reason. But Yue Wuhuan didn't care about anyone other than Song Qingshi, so his puppets were merciless.

Numerous cultivators had already died under the poisonous touch of Yue Wuhuan's puppets. He withheld the truth from Song Qingshi, worried that he'd find it cruel, and kept observing Song Qingshi's mood. Seeing his emotion eventually settle on happiness, Yue Wuhuan breathed a sigh of relief.

"The student will always surpass the master," Song Qingshi said, full of fierce pride in his little angel.

"Zunzhu, that's too much. If you hadn't created the puppets in the first place, I couldn't have protected the valley."

"They must have given An Long a tough time, huh? He would've already gotten in otherwise."

"An-xianzun knows you well. It only took him a few tries to figure out their weak spots. I let him think he'd succeeded, before I replaced your puppets and arrays with mine. The poison took An-xianzun out of commission for half a year, but he's

committed. When he came back, I used the bloodking vines to create a new trap for him. That successfully drove him away, but he had already figured out that plan of attack."

Yue Wuhuan felt helpless when he explained the situation. The Thousand Poison Sect never shied away from battle, and An Long was no exception. He was well-versed in various martial arts, and like a wild beast, he could sense danger from a mile away. His cultivation level was very high, and Song Qingshi's previous guidance helped him evade most of Yue Wuhuan's poisonous traps. Careful calculation just didn't hold up to absolute violence.

If Song Qingshi wasn't the sort to take extensive notes and hadn't recorded his observations of An Long's bugs, the good luck that had come to Yue Wuhuan after his unlucky tribulation might have run out long ago—at the hands of An Long.

"An Long is a genius. It's already amazing you stopped him twice. Most golden-core cultivators couldn't achieve that. I'm sure that once we explain the misunderstanding, he'll stop attacking you."

"Yes, I'm sure An-xianzun will forgive me." Yue Wuhuan smiled, thinking of their mutual grudge.

They shared a quiet laugh as they walked into the classroom. It was noon, and the students had all gone to the cafeteria to eat. Song Qingshi took the chance to explore the vacant classrooms.

The school was situated within a square courtyard, and the garden was exquisitely arranged, just as Yue Wuhuan liked it. A main room was flanked by two elixir rooms, both painted with arrays to contain explosions. Their pupils studied in the main room, where they kept a podium, bookshelves, and all varieties of equipment for experiments, plenty of which were made by the Pavilion of Heavenly Crafts. Song Qingshi noticed some instruments he'd wanted to order before his absence but couldn't afford.

Looking around at this expensive school, Song Qingshi sensed his wallet had gotten quite a lot lighter over the years.

“Zunzhu, we’re not lacking in money anymore,” Yue Wuhuan jumped to explain. “We reached an agreement with the Night Rain Pavilion. The ointment you invented for those with disfigured faces improves skin texture and gets rid of scars. I added some expensive fragrances and pearls to the ointment, named it Jade Complexion Ointment, and sold it for a high price. Because it makes the skin soft, pale, and smooth in addition to healing scars, it’s a hot commodity among female cultivators, especially with all the fighting that goes on in the immortal realm. Ye Lin-xianjun’s begging us to ramp up production.”

Song Qingshi’s jaw dropped. He’d hit it rich selling skincare, not medicine? There was something…not quite right…

“Zunzhu, your condition was dangerous and expensive, so I chose the method that gained the most profit in the least time.” Yue Wuhuan handed the account book to Song Qingshi for review. “We’ve spent most of our budget on medicine and materials to rebuild the Medicine King’s Valley, these past few years. Right now, we have about 3.2 million spiritual crystals.”

He hadn’t known what to think when Yue Wuhuan first told him the news, but seeing the big, shiny numbers in the account book made it easier to let go.

He’d already created the youth elixir, so this “Jade Complexion Cream” was nothing! Securely funded, he could develop more medicines and bring happiness to the world. It was a win-win!

“You should know, I told Night Rain Pavilion to advertise the ointment not as your invention but as a formula passed down from ancient times. The jars just say it’s the best medicine for scars and troubled complexions.”

Medicated skincare was still medicine!

Yue Wuhuan had maintained the Medicine King’s reputation to his satisfaction. Song Qingshi didn’t have the smarts to manage money without squandering it, so he pressed the account book back into Yue Wuhuan’s arms.

“You’re in charge of the money from now on. Just make sure I get a monthly allowance,” Song Qingshi said generously.

Yue Wuhuan’s lips curved up into a beautiful arc, as though he’d heard something delightful. “All right. I’ll buy anything you want.”

Song Qingshi was even more satisfied.

After touring the school, he put away his red lotus blaze and sat down on the chair on the raised platform at the front of the classroom.

Yue Wuhuan called all the students in with instruction to greet the Medicine King.

Song Qingshi wore the same severe expression as his university professors to disguise his stage fright, all the while wondering who these people were.

At the time, he hadn’t taken a good look at many of the children, but he recognized Qingluan and Minghong. The life seal had preserved Qingluan’s appearance exactly, but she no longer seemed so dainty and soft. She walked with confidence and had a capable aura about her, like his female upperclassmen from his old world.

Minghong had grown into a quiet, reticent young man. He wore red, and not only did his dress remind Song Qingshi of Yue Wuhuan, they had similar mannerisms too.

A muscular hunk followed behind them. It took Song Qingshi too long to recognize the sunny youth who had helped another student through stretches in the yard. He was tall and tanned now, and well-developed from head to toe. No trace of his youthful beauty remained, other than his striking features.

Qingluan presented him with an amused grin. “This is He Qingyun. He studies the agriculture of medicinal herbs. He usually works in the fields, so now… Well, he looks like this.”

“No more assholes will go around coveting my beauty if I’m like this, right?” He Qingyun scratched his head, then gave a laugh. “Besides, I used to be a farmer, so planting crops is all I know. Since you saved me, Zunzhu, I ought to repay you. I didn’t amount to much as a cultivator, but I can definitely go to the village in the future and grow plants for you.”

Song Qingshi smiled and nodded, resolving to help his students establish foundations later with medicinal help.

A beautiful youth somewhere around eighteen stood at the rear. He had a pair of distinguished peach-blossom eyes and a dreamy air around him. When he thought no one was looking, he yawned and played with something in his hands.

It was like Song Qingshi had caught a naughty student playing with his phone at the back of the class. Unable to maintain his serious expression, he smiled and beckoned the young man forward.

Qingluan glared at the young man. "*This* is Rongye. He's from the same batch of kids as Minghong. He's never suffered any hardship, so he's a slacker, but he's quite nimble with his hands. Zunzhu, please don't be too angry. I'll slowly teach and guide him."

Rongye feared Qingluan's daily scoldings in particular. He dragged himself to the front to surrender his toy.

Song Qingshi heard her hidden praise. Qingluan wanted to protect the kids that shared her tragic past, so he didn't want to make a big fuss over Rongye.

Song Qingshi inspected Rongye's toy, a detailed little handmade hourglass. He turned it over and set it on the desk. Extensive elixir-making had left him with a good sense of time; the sand took just about a minute to flow from top to bottom.

"Rongye isn't very careful, and often loses track of time when working on elixirs, so he made this," Qingluan said.

"Qingluan-jiejie, I haven't screwed up once since I made this! Please stop talking about that time I failed."

"Be quiet!" Qingluan barked. "Plenty of us have failed at things, but you're the only one who blew up a cauldron!"

"I just wanted to know what would happen if I added a little massicot…"

"Your hands are indeed nimble, nice work." Song Qingshi remembered the way his professors had treated their students, and offered Rongye some positive

reinforcement. “Controlling the flame’s temperature is the first difficulty beginners encounter, then time. With the help of a tool, you’ve decreased one difficulty. It’s a good idea, but you shouldn’t rely on it in the long run. I think we can get the Pavilion of Heavenly Crafts to make better time-telling devices to help with elixir-making.”

“Zunzhu’s right,” Yue Wuhuan said. “We *should* get something like that for the elixir rooms.”

Qingluan glared at Rongye again. The device aided in the creation of low-level elixirs, but higher-level techniques were mysterious and ever-changing. How long something took depended entirely on the maker’s experience, so setting a timer and expecting the same results every time wouldn’t work. If Rongye relied on clever shortcuts, he’d never master the art of elixir-making.

Rongye was young, attractive, and a sweet-talker, so everyone spoiled him rotten. Qingluan would definitely teach him a lesson about not slacking off later!

Song Qingshi just didn’t want to give his young students a hard time. He handed the hourglass to Rongye with a smile. “I expect you to work hard.”

Rongye’s ears turned red from Song Qingshi’s attention. Even before they came to the Medicine King’s Valley, Qingluan had spoken of the Medicine King as a prominent figure in the immortal realm, with powerful cultivation. He’d killed Xie Que without the slightest difficulty and had left only ashes behind. After that, Qingluan took charge of their care. He never saw the Medicine King himself, so he’d assumed the man was some kind of cultivator with fierce looks. Unexpectedly, he was very pretty, and didn’t look much older than the rest of them. He was gentle and amicable—not scary at all.

Since the Medicine King likes Wuhuan-xianzhang so much, he’s probably gay, right?

Rongye knew that mortals who managed to catch the eye of a cultivator reaped rewards, sometimes more riches than they could spend in a lifetime. Was that what Yue Wuhuan had received?

He glanced from Song Qingshi to Yue Wuhuan, who stood behind the former, in deep contemplation.

Chapter 36

SONG QINGSHI CHECKED everyone's homework to get the measure of their level and capability.

Yue Wuhuan had certainly chosen promising young sprouts and he'd even split them into different specialties depending on their talents. They all had good grades, though Qingluan and Minghong were at the top of their class. Even Rongye the loafer had his own gift—he was interested in mechanics and traps, not medicine.

"Qingluan is smart and capable," Yue Wuhuan said. "While you were in isolation, she helped me handle many problems."

Song Qingshi gestured for Qingluan to come closer and checked her cultivation.

She had already established a foundation, and didn't lack talent. She had a double-element spiritual root: wood and water. He nodded his approval and resolved to have her work closely with him in the future so he could observe her. If he felt satisfied with her performance, he'd accept her as a normal disciple and appoint her as Yue Wuhuan's assistant.

Qingluan dropped to her knees, grateful for their praise.

The life seal was still tattooed on her back, Song Qingshi knew. He turned to Yue Wuhuan. "Spirit essence is just a medium for the seal. After the seal is formed, you can get rid of it in the same way. Why haven't you done so?"

"They belong to you, so it should be your decision," Yue Wuhuan explained.

"What is there to decide?" Song Qingshi asked with a little laugh. "Give me her life bead. I'll get rid of it now."

Qingluan looked up quietly, glanced at Yue Wuhuan, and dared not answer.

"She probably doesn't have it on her," Yue Wuhuan said. "There's no rush. We can deal with it tomorrow. You just came out of isolation."

Song Qingshi agreed without much thought, then dragged Yue Wuhuan to see his little white mice and labs. Qingluan trailed behind while Song Qingshi peppered Yue Wuhuan with questions.

"You've done so much in ten years. It wasn't easy, was it?"

"It was no trouble, Zunzhu. You don't need to worry yourself with such things."

"Creating the bloodflower powder requires silky bloodgrass, and silky bloodgrass went extinct long ago. How did you get your hands on it?"

"With luck," Yue Wuhuan said.

Song Qingshi didn't suspect anything and sighed. "You're so lucky. I've been after the stuff for years but was never successful."

"I've had nothing but luck since I met you."

Qingluan blinked away an upwelling of tears. She wanted to say something but stopped herself—and it was a good thing, because Yue Wuhuan noticed and turned around to give her a warning look. She swallowed her feelings and her words.

It was impossible for her to forget that Song Qingshi had saved her life, but Yue Wuhuan was still her guiding light.

She remembered their first meeting, when she was just six…

It had been deep autumn in the forest. She stumbled on a green-robed youth perched on a golden wutong tree, playing "A Phoenix Seeks His Mate" on his white jade xiao.

The xiao's lonely song lingered in the golden-red colors of autumn, each note suffused with longing.

Yue Wuhuan's gentle phoenix eyes surpassed the brilliant beauty around him. Wind shook the golden wutong and the fiery red maple, and it seemed as though his robes became one with the leaves. He was like the peerless phoenix, unrivaled in his

gorgeousness throughout the world. Birds flocked to his music like crowds of worshippers desperate for his favor.

Skylarks, orioles, cuckoos, and kingfishers, bird after bird crowded the branches around him, captivated by his song as if it was the most moving music in the world.

Qingluan couldn't help herself. Like the birds, the music drew her to his side and held her, rapt. In legends, qingluan birds were the phoenix's subjects. They spent their lives chasing after, bowing down to that radiant light. When she was with him, it was an indescribable feeling, like a memory carved into her bones, telling her exactly whom she should be loyal to.

She'd hoped he would find the happiness missing from his music.

She'd hoped he could soar forever.

When Qingluan was freed from her shackles, she was like a happy mother hen bringing her flock of children to the Medicine King's Valley. She had so many things to tell Yue Wuhuan, like the questions Song Qingshi had asked her, like his expression when he first received the box…

But she took one look at Yue Wuhuan and realized he had changed.

He was so injured and exhausted he couldn't conceal the restless madness in his eyes. He recognized her but showed little interest, and even seemed disgusted. He forced himself to continue on, allowing them patience only because the Medicine King had ordered so.

His eyes were no longer gentle or kind. Although he provided for the children patiently, Qingluan found his commands cold, always issued at a distance. Sometimes, he disappeared, and days passed with no sight of him.

Qingluan thought something terrible might have happened in the Medicine King's Valley.

She persuaded most of the children who still harbored delusions about the immortal realm to return to the mortal one, then took it upon herself to care for the ones who had nowhere left to go.

For a long time after that, the Medicine King remained in isolation, and Yue Wuhuan became very busy. He stayed in the library or the labs and rarely showed his face. Qingluan volunteered to become a servant in charge of cleaning the main entrance during the day, and at night, she helped the kids recite medical texts.

The next time she saw Yue Wuhuan, his face was already ruined. It was covered in horrible, discolored blemishes. Qingluan stifled a scream, but Yue Wuhuan just smiled at her and left Medicine King's Valley with his disfigurement intact.

Everyone had something to say. Without his good looks, he'd surely lose the Medicine King's favor once he came out of isolation. Qingluan thought of Song Qingshi's gentle nature and shook her head. She had a feeling that wouldn't be the case.

Yue Wuhuan returned with both serious injuries and minor ones: slashes, punctures, any and all kinds of hurt. He'd refuse any treatment but his own and retreat to the pharmacy. While he recovered, he furiously read and studied. Once healed, he'd leave the valley again, and no one ever knew where he went.

Because of him, Medicine King's Valley looked peaceful from the outside. No one saw the ongoing crisis.

Qingluan, however, knew she had to do *something*—for Yue Wuhuan, for Song Qingshi, for the Medicine King's Valley, and for all the children.

No matter how soft her feathers were, she had to shield them.

One day, Yue Wuhuan had come back injured yet again. Qingluan decided to go against his orders and snuck into the pharmacy, where she saw an unbelievable sight.

Yue Wuhuan was sewing up a wound on his abdomen. He clearly hadn't used any anesthetic drugs. Instead, he had a piece of wood clenched between his teeth. The needle plunged into his flesh, drawing the wound closed stitch by stitch. He was covered in cold sweat, but only acknowledged the pain with a few quiet grunts.

Suddenly, he noticed her presence and closed his robes around himself.

"Who's there?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

Qingluan closed her eyes against her grief, then stepped out from the shadows.

Yue Wuhuan drew his sword and watched her approach.

Qingluan knelt and presented her life bead in her outstretched hands.

As soon as Yue Wuhuan saw the familiar red bead, he understood her intentions. His gaze was dark and unreadable.

"I know something happened to the Medicine King, but I won't pry." Qingluan spoke quietly, but her voice remained firm. "I know you have your own concerns, Wuhuan-ge. I won't ask you to trust me. But the Medicine King's Valley is the only place I have. It's the last refuge for those poor children. Please accept my life. As long as you control this bead, I can't disobey or harm you. Use me. I'll do anything."

"Anything?" Yue Wuhuan couldn't help but laugh at her childish plea. "Even if I'm no longer the person you remember? Even if you sully your hands with blood? Even if you lose your life? Even if it dooms you for eternity?"

Qingluan met his eyes. "Yes!"

Qingluan birds prostrated at the feet of the phoenix, forever chasing its shadow in the sky. She was willing to offer what little strength she had.

Yue Wuhuan observed her in silence. After an unbearable interval, he took her life bead and accepted her loyalty.

From that day on, Qingluan served Yue Wuhuan as his loyal subordinate. She juggled the valley's public and private affairs, paid witness to Yue Wuhuan's cruel side, and cleared the wretched flesh littering the torture chamber. She washed the floor clean of blood, queasy at first, then without batting an eye. She helped spin a spiderweb around the Medicine King's Valley with Yue Wuhuan at the center, where he set the traps and pulled the strings. She polished his perfect reputation, so Song Qingshi and the children would never see it tarnished.

It wasn't enough.

Yue Wuhuan forced himself to extremes daily. No part of him escaped injury, but he spared no time for recovery. He absorbed knowledge that changed him down to the

blood and bone—the most efficient ways to kill, poisons and arrays, how to manipulate hearts—in a calculated scheme to overcome every difficulty.

The most precious herbs grew in the deadliest places. Every step exacted a heavy toll. Sometimes he succeeded, sometimes he failed. When he failed, he tried again. Nothing deterred him, no matter how torturous or painful.

Qingluan was only in charge of the internal matters of the Medicine King's Valley. She rarely knew where he went or what he was doing. However, she did learn something five years in, when the Master of the Night Rain Pavilion arrived at the valley with an unconscious Yue Wuhuan.

Sixty percent of his bones were broken, and no single inch of his skin was uninjured. He clutched something in his fist he would surrender for nothing. Only his wood element spirit root and a reliance on elixirs had seen him through whatever trial he'd faced. Qingluan couldn't hold her tongue any longer. She asked Ye Lin why Yue Wuhuan was doing this.

Ye Lin couldn't help but curse heartily at her question. "What foundation-level cultivator dares tread the Stage of Death? Only a reckless maniac!"

Rich cultivators moved onto bigger game when they tired of dogs and cockfights. That was how the dark gambling game, the Stage of Death, came to be. The last cultivator standing on the stage could claim any treasure from a pool of prizes…if they wagered their life. It only ever ended in tragedy.

Yue Wuhuan was on his last breath, but he was still alive. That meant he was the victor. He'd earned his long-extinct silky bloodgrass.

Ye Lin was a man of his word. He handed the silky bloodgrass and Yue Wuhuan over to Qingluan, and started to recount the brutality that had played out on the Stage of Death.

"Hmph. That Xuanyu-xianzun only got to where he was through pills and elixirs." He slammed his hand on the table. "But a yuanying cultivator should be able to suppress a foundation-level cultivator with their spiritual powers alone. Xuanyu-xianzun's body is invulnerable. No average cultivator could harm him, never mind disable him. They

just wanted to watch Xuanyu-xianzun torture and kill Wuhuan-gongzi for fun. How could Yue Wuhuan, as smart as he is, not see that? But he'd still die for a little bloodgrass!"

Ye Lin took a deep breath. "I had a coffin waiting for him—at no cost, to honor our working relationship. When does Song Qingshi leave isolation? How could he let the precious baby he spent two hundred thousand spiritual crystals on do such a thing?!"

"Xianjun, please don't say something like that," Qingluan murmured.

In the immortal realm, cultivators going into isolation was a common occurrence. Some did it to build the power necessary to ascend to the next cultivation level, while others sought what had delayed their ascension. Song Qingshi was known for his intelligence and focus when it came to his cultivation. He had neared the yuanying level's peak a century prior and stood at the cusp of the fenshen level. It was about time that he went into seclusion, so no one suspected anything.

Ye Lin sighed. "I've never seen such a brutal Stage of Death. His limbs were all broken. There was blood everywhere. He was on the ground, as good as dead. I was ready to put him in the coffin. *Somehow*, at the last second, right when Xuanyu-xianzun thought he'd won, Yue Wuhuan shot the poisonous needle he'd hidden in his mouth into his opponent's weak spot."

Those who cultivated invulnerability couldn't be harmed by weapons, but each one had a weak spot that couldn't be trained away; it could only be hidden.

Once the match ended, Ye Lin realized Yue Wuhuan must've known Xuanyu-xianzun was out to torture him from the start. He'd deduced his opponent's weak spot by feinting and playing weak. He only had to wait until he was too injured to move. When Xuanyu-xianzun closed in for the kill, Yue Wuhuan had made his final move.

There was only once chance. It'd been over in a flash.

Yue Wuhuan hadn't hesitated at all, and Xuanyu-xianzun had been the one to die.

The crowd's roar shook the Stage of Death. No one could believe their eyes. Ye Lin sold the coffin to Xuanyu-xianzun's disciple at a discount, accepted the silky

bloodgrass on Yue Wuhuan's behalf, held off his imminent death with some medicine, then found a stretcher to take him back to the valley to explain *everything*.

He left Qingluan with instructions. "All right, that's enough crying. If he dies, make sure the Medicine King comes to Night Rain Pavilion to settle the cost of treatment. We can't let this affect production of the Jade Complexion Ointment."

Qingluan agreed, stifling the turmoil in her heart.

She was familiar with traumatic injuries from her studies and had occasionally helped Yue Wuhuan attend to hard-to-reach wounds on his back. When Yue Wuhuan had left on this trip, Qingluan had anticipated the worst, so she'd prepared many treatments and medications. She dressed his wounds, and though she glimpsed whatever he held—it looked like a smooth white cobblestone—she couldn't pry his hand open.

Yue Wuhuan lay unconscious for three days and nights.

After he woke up, he took a whiff of the stone in his hand and struggled out of bed without accepting Qingluan's help. He staggered, then crawled toward Fuling Palace.

The crowd leering at him upon the Stage of Death, Xuanyu-xianzun's obscene taunts… Yue Wuhuan could not feel more disgusting. Even Qingluan's care made him deeply uncomfortable.

The air was so dirty he couldn't breathe, and his thoughts wouldn't stop racing. He had to return to his only refuge in order to breathe.

"Wuhuan-ge, I know something happened to Zunzhu." Qingluan knelt beside him. "Please, let me help you so you can go see him."

Yue Wuhuan turned back to her slowly. His phoenix eyes were narrowed and dangerous.

"You can't keep this secret alone. If you hadn't survived the Stage of Death, then what?" Qingluan asked, trying to persuade him.

Yue Wuhuan didn't reply.

Qingluan pushed on. "If you die, who's going to save Zunzhu?"

"There's someone. Don't worry," Yue Wuhuan rasped. "I made an array with my life plaque. If I die, it will send out a message with Zunzhu's location… But I refuse to hand him over to that man, so no matter how hard things get, I'll survive."

Song Qingshi's condition required a combination of medicines Yue Wuhuan had developed piecemeal, and some ingredients weren't available on the market. He didn't have time to search the whole world, and he had no one to rely on, so he fought and schemed alone. He was putting his life on the line, but he had no other choice.

If he lost, the array would inform An Long of Song Qingshi's condition. That was a last resort.

Song Qingshi had no way to resist. All of his spiritual power was focused on sealing the poisonous fire inside himself. Anyone who had him could do anything they wanted to him. Yue Wuhuan could imagine what that atrocious wolf An Long would do. Thinking about it was so painful it made him nauseous.

On the Stage of Death, even as he faded, Yue Wuhuan clung to that threat like he did the stone in his hand. He couldn't die. If he died, he lost everything. There were bugs that could alter memories, and An Long was willing to achieve his goals no matter the means. If given the chance, he would erase Yue Wuhuan from Song Qingshi's heart.

And if Song Qingshi forgot him, that would be an anguish greater than anything Yue Wuhuan had experienced on Golden Phoenix Mountain.

No matter how hard it was, he would crawl out of hell. No one could take Song Qingshi away from him.

Nevertheless, Yue Wuhuan finally accepted Qingluan's help. He didn't trust her absolutely, but his battle on the Stage of Death had imparted a lesson: If he succumbed to his wounds, even if he didn't die, something could happen to Song Qingshi in his absence.

Qingluan helped him into the secret room. She gawked first at Song Qingshi, who drifted insensate in a pool of milky white medicine, then at the simple furniture around the bath.

"Wuhuan-ge, have you slept here the whole time?" Qingluan asked in disbelief.

The damp would creep into anyone's bones in an underground room like this. How could someone with his injuries stand it?

"He likes having me here. He gets lonely, otherwise." Yue Wuhuan leaned into the bath, and his tightly wound body relaxed. The light in his eyes softened. It was like his entire soul was attached to the man in the pool, leaving nothing for himself. He smiled, pulled Song Qingshi's hand to his lips, and kissed the back of it, then spoke with great emotion.

"Qingshi, I have the bloodgrass. We'll try something new.

"Qingshi, I'm still alive. I haven't relapsed.

"Qingshi, spring's here. Can I plant something in your yard?

"Qingshi, I heard that Green Jade Pavilion has the most delicious peach blossom pastries. Why don't we try some later?

"Qingshi…"

He had an endless number of things to say to someone who could not hear him, and he held that senseless hand as if it were the whole world.

Qingluan quietly backed out of the secret room. There was no room for anyone here but them.

In her memory, the tune Yue Wuhuan had played in the wutong tree had ended in a brilliant crescendo of color.

Looking back on the suffering of these last ten years, Qingluan felt like it had all been a nightmare. Now that Song Qingshi was awake, she could also wake up. The yoke had been lifted from her shoulders, and she could relax.

She understood Yue Wuhuan. All the pain had passed. There was no need to tell Song Qingshi and burden him with regret. They just had to look forward. There were better days ahead.

As for his and Yue Wuhuan's feelings…

Qingluan smiled. She would say a few prayers to Yue Lao[1] for a happy ending.

She reached her yard, where the hazy moonlight shone on someone else: a red-robed youth. He was playing "A Phoenix Seeks His Mate," but unfortunately, he was not musically inclined. No matter how hard he practiced, he couldn't get it right. The rhythm kept stuttering, and now and then a few notes ran off, unable to find their homes.

He snuck a glance at her, abashed. Qingluan kept her smile, and moved to sit by his side, where she could listen quietly.

She hoped everyone could be happy.

Chapter 37

DIRTY MICE, CLEAN MICE, germ-free mice…

There were now eight rooms dedicated to husbandry of the little white mice, each compliant with strict instructions for their care. The population numbered in the thousands. Soon they'd breed mice with specific inherited conditions. In the labs, there were several new instruments that Song Qingshi had always wanted but never had the money to order, and the medicine was well-stocked. The many experiments he'd unwillingly abandoned could now be continued.

This happiness came too suddenly. It was like Song Qingshi had taken a nap and woken up to everything.

Song Qingshi's heart pattered as he looked at the cages of white mice. He pulled on Yue Wuhuan's sleeve, trying to convey his excitement, but the words inside of him were like dumplings stuck in the spout of a kettle. The more he wanted to speak, the harder it was. He almost wanted to cry.

"You've done so well. Thank you," his clumsy mouth eventually squeezed out.

He must've collected good karma from three lifetimes to meet such a sweet little angel! Yue Wuhuan was brilliant, beautiful, kind, cute, gentle, and considerate too.

Later, Song Qingshi would write all his gratitude down in his notebook and look over it three times a day to remind himself he'd struck gold.

"The little mice breed very quickly. Later on, I had to control the population. I've done medical tests on some of them. Of course, I'm still not sure how to use them for other experiments, so I've only done simple poison testing… I disposed of them afterward."

Yue Wuhuan had learned mice only required a 0.2 percent dose to test a poison's efficacy, which meant they didn't have to squander precious ingredients.

These last ten years, he'd committed to mastering *Nie's Book of Poison* and all other texts on the topic he could get his hands on. He'd also studied Song Qingshi's collection of poisons, increased the toxicity of the powder of contortion, and invented many new compounds—as well as stealthier ways to use them.

On the Stage of Death, he'd taken someone's life with a single needle. Now no one dared trifle with him.

Yue Wuhuan smiled and watched Song Qingshi furiously scribble notes at his desk. Song Qingshi often lost himself in experiments; once he entered a lab, he could think of nothing else.

Nine fiery red vines fanned out behind Yue Wuhuan. Two cleaned cages, two fed mice, two fetched tea and snacks, and another two browsed books. The ninth wrapped itself around Song Qingshi's ankle. Then Yue Wuhuan sat down next to Song Qingshi to take care of the various tasks of the Medicine King's Valley.

After Song Qingshi finished recording his observations, he began to draft a guide to breeding mice with specific inherited diseases. It was a long time before he noticed the vines hard at work throughout the room.

"They're sentient?" He stared at his ankle, astonished.

"No." Yue Wuhuan paused his writing. "They're just following my will, like extensions of my limbs. I can use my spiritual senses through them, so they're convenient helpers. It's how I've been getting things done."

"You're doing all that simultaneously?" Song Qingshi goggled first at the studious pair of vines, then the account book in Yue Wuhuan's hand. "It's like you're several people at once!"

"Yes. I have many responsibilities. If it's not something very important, it's faster if I multitask with the different vines."

Realizing that might not have been the best way to say it, Yue Wuhuan tried to save the situation by having both the vines present the books they were perusing. "*I'm*

reading *Ling Danzi's Classic of Calculation*, and the other book is the results of the students' experiments. I'm just reviewing it for accuracy."

Juggling tasks came naturally to Yue Wuhuan, like breathing or drinking water. He didn't know how to explain it.

For the first time in both lives, Overachiever Song could tell someone else was crushing him in terms of intelligence. It summoned up several mixed emotions.

It was like when he'd tried to explain elementary school math to his younger cousin. The question his cousin needed to solve was something anyone could solve at a glance, yet Song Qingshi had been forced to explain using a whole bunch of different methods, from calculus to algebraic geometry to abstract mathematics…

His cousin had wept and said if that was what it took, he didn't want to learn. Now that Song Qingshi was on the receiving end, he regretted scolding his cousin for being immature.

As Yue Wuhuan struggled to explain how to multitask and what he had learned from doing so, Song Qingshi felt very sorry for himself. He really couldn't parse Yue Wuhuan's explanations, nor could he copy him. If Song Qingshi was working on something, he could *not* focus on anything else. When something caught his eye, there was no room for anything else. Other yuanying cultivators were alert and kept their senses open to everything around them, but if Song Qingshi saw something novel, he'd immediately forget everything else. He'd survived until now purely because of his unique constitution and a preference for staying home.

"The way you are is just fine," Yue Wuhuan said warmly.

He liked the way Song Qingshi looked at others: attentively, like there was no one else in the world.

Regardless, Overachiever Song wanted to salvage his reputation. He flipped through *Ling Danzi's Classic of Calculation*. In his memory, math in the immortal realm hadn't advanced beyond the average high school curriculum. Anyone could solve an algebraic expression with three unknowns or apply trigonometric functions.

Most cultivators didn't care for math, which Song Qingshi didn't agree with.

He had created many of his arrays with the use of math. With his knowledge from his other world, he could clearly see that arrays were like motherboards. He had to calculate the optimal arrangement of lines along exact coordinates, and spiritual energy flowed through them like electricity connecting different boards. With that, they could communicate or observe over long distances, be used for defense, and even control weapons.

This realm didn't have machines, so arrays could not be mass produced. Each had to be handmade, meaning accurate calculations were vital. Song Qingshi was very impressed that Yue Wuhuan had figured out the importance of math on his own.

Song Qingshi excelled at math, so he chattered away, expounding on all kinds of equations and their uses. Later, he'd write about calculus, number theory, and mathematical analysis. These were the basics for a STEM student!

Yue Wuhuan listened intently, withdrawing the vines from their work. Until dusk, he immersed himself in the joy of solving math problem after math problem with Song Qingshi.

Suddenly, the poison puppets entered offense mode, indicating there was a disturbance in the valley's arrays. Noticing the disruption, Yue Wuhuan looked up from the sea of math questions and glanced outside, displeased. He shut the books on the desk.

Song Qingshi wasn't familiar with the new defense arrays and was a little slow on the uptake. "Someone's…invading?"

"Not quite." Yue Wuhuan smiled. "They're just here to dismantle the place."

A massive cloud of insects slammed through the lab doors before Song Qingshi could process what he meant, and the two poison puppets standing guard quickly disappeared beneath the countless pests. A frenzied An Long stormed in after the bugs.

His hair was longer now, hanging down his neck in a few haphazard braids. He was covered in mud, and his lips were so dry the dirt on his face was tinted with blood.

He trained his bloodshot eyes on Yue Wuhuan.

Next to An Long, Haolong was no less disheveled; its scales no longer shone. Its forked tongue flickered toward Yue Wuhuan like it wanted to swallow him whole.

"What's going on?" Song Qingshi asked. "Did you guys roll around in the mud?"

"We've lost the poison array in the swamps, Zunzhu," Yue Wuhuan explained calmly.

That was enough for Song Qingshi to catch on. Feeling guilty, he drooped his shoulders and curled in on himself.

With gritted teeth, An Long glared at the fool that had so worried him that he couldn't eat or sleep. Seeing the tea and snacks on the table, then remembering the single letter of explanation he'd just received—after all the suffering he'd gone through to break in—An Long longed to tear the flesh from Song Qingshi's body.

Song Qingshi noted An Long's expression and split lip and guessed what he was thinking. He picked up the tea he hadn't touched yet and presented it to him with both hands.

"Do you want some?"

An Long barked a laugh and knocked the tea back in one gulp. Then he seized the oblivious Song Qingshi in a viselike grip, slung him over his shoulder, and strode out of the lab, prepared to teach him a lesson he'd never forget.

Plenty of servants witnessed Song Qingshi's embarrassment, but he couldn't fault An Long for delivering his long-delayed comeuppance. He felt too guilty to burn him. The fire in Song Qingshi's hands rose then dissipated, rose then dissipated. In his hesitation, he allowed An Long to lope quite far.

The bugs at the lab door retreated like the tide, then rallied once again, surrounding Yue Wuhuan.

An Long carried Song Qingshi all the way to Fuling Palace. During his journey, he realized the Medicine King's Valley, which had remained unchanged for hundreds of

years, looked completely different now. Familiar sights were gone, and so much of the decor was obnoxious and colorful. There were signs of that demon, Yue Wuhuan, *everywhere*.

The places where he'd left traces had been violated, tainted with a scent that didn't belong. The more he thought about it, the angrier he got. He slammed Song Qingshi down.

Even without body cultivation, a regular cultivator could have absorbed the blow and remained upright. But Song Qingshi couldn't summon strength to half his body in his current state. He wobbled before falling in a heap, where he remained for some time.

An Long was shocked, then suspicious, then regretful when he realized how weak Song Qingshi had become. A chunk of his anger disappeared.

Haolong didn't understand much and wasn't *that* mad at Song Qingshi to begin with. When it saw him fall, it grew distressed. It slithered over and stood upright so Song Qingshi could use it as a cane.

"That's nice of you, Xiaobai." Song Qingshi levered himself upright with Haolong's assistance and limped over to An Long. "If *you* have something to say, spit it out. I don't want to fight with you."

"You still haven't recovered?" An Long picked him up like a rag doll and checked him over everywhere before he rolled up Song Qingshi's sleeve and squeezed the bare arm. "You can't move your left side?"

"I was struck by lightning." Song Qingshi decided to tell the truth. "The skin and meridians on that side are newly grown. I don't move that well yet."

"It does look a little softer than before." An Long squinted, feeling Song Qingshi's arm up and down. Then, he licked his lips and ground his teeth.

Song Qingshi hurriedly tried to pull back, but An Long's grip held firm, and his arm wouldn't budge no matter how hard he tried.

"You can have one bite," Song Qingshi said, giving up. "But more than that, and I'll let my fire loose."

An Long raised a brow and smirked. “Why don’t you just go ahead and burn me?”

“Because this isn’t your fault.” Song Qingshi preferred to admit his mistakes and bravely take responsibility. “Sure, it was an accident, but it’s my fault you were so worried. You can have a bite if it helps blow off steam.”

Also, he shouldn’t have drawn a dog head on the envelope. That was disrespectful.

A hint of a smile hung on the corners of An Long’s lips. His grip softened, his urge to bite quelled as the rest of his anger faded.

Song Qingshi tried to keep the momentum going. “Since it was my fault, take it out on me, okay? Not Wuhua—”

Song Qingshi shrieked as An Long’s teeth clamped down on his tender, pale flesh, like he intended to tear off a mouthful.

Song Qingshi’s eyes nearly overflowed. An Alaskan malamute’s bite really hurt.

Chapter 38

AN LONG RELEASED Song Qingshi after that and started interrogating him about the tribulation.

"I don't know," Song Qingshi said, sounding put out. "The lightning just struck so suddenly."

"Did you do some profane experiment? Make an elixir that upset the natural balance? Did somebody frame you?" An Long hadn't counted Yue Wuhuan's own tribulation among the countless possibilities. Who would suffer heaven's wrath just for forming a foundation? All the evidence he'd gathered pointed to a tribulation intended for someone at the yuanying level, so he naturally assumed it had been for Song Qingshi. "Or…did you try to reach the fenshen level through tribulation?"

"None of the above! There was something wrong with the heavens."

Scientifically speaking, he couldn't assume a causative link between Yue Wuhuan and the tribulation. Those pieces of trash, Jin Feiren and Xie Que, hadn't suffered heavenly retribution, so how could Yue Wuhuan? He was a mere mortal, kind and gentle. How could the heavens punish him? The lightning had been a freak accident!

"Maybe a demonic cultivator failed *their* tribulation and used a life-swap spell to send the lightning to us instead."

The life-swap spell was a forbidden technique that the demonic cultivators had lost long ago, said to transfer fatal injuries to someone else, in very rare circumstances. It only worked for someone with the same birth chart who was in the right place at the right time.

Yue Wuhuan had been kept by Golden Phoenix Mountain for many years and had no status. His birth chart wouldn't have been hard to get.

An Long and Song Qingshi both threw out many other guesses about what could have happened, but it didn't result in any conclusions.

“Everything happened too quickly.” Song Qingshi reiterated himself as simply as possible for the Alaskan malamute, who refused to see reason. “I didn’t have time to leave instructions. Yue Wuhuan isn’t close with you. He even seems to have a bit of a grudge. How could he ask you for help? If he hadn’t sealed off the Medicine King’s Valley and the news got out, I’d really be dead.”

An Long scoffed. “Who knows what that kid’s got up his sleeve? I thought you were severely injured and had fallen into his hands, that he had you under lock and key.”

Song Qingshi was baffled. “If he wants Medicine King’s Valley that bad, he can kill me. Why would he bother to heal me first?”

“You don’t understand men!” An Long wished for a bowl of ice water. He could empty it on Song Qingshi to wake him up.

“*I’m* a man,” Song Qingshi said, insulted. “How could I not understand men?”

“Have you seen the way he covets your beauty?!”

Song Qingshi fell silent. He searched An Long’s eyes for a long time, wondering if there was something wrong with them. How could he not see that Yue Wuhuan was at least ten times prettier than him? Besides, aside from the fact that Yue Wuhuan was the main character, he had devastating beauty, and he was gentle and cute. He did not covet. He was covet*ed*, okay?!

An Long realized he’d overplayed his hand. He turned his back on Song Qingshi with a huff.

“Why do you think Yue Wuhuan wants to harm me?” Song Qingshi asked suspiciously.

Once An Long began to suspect something had happened in the valley, he kept up with Yue Wuhuan’s exploits. Whatever he did on the Stage of Death or in a secret realm, he had surpassed the capabilities of a foundation-level cultivator. He used any means necessary; he was cruel to others—and even crueler to himself. There was nothing normal about him, from his actions to the way he thought.

When the immortal realm spoke of him, they no longer called him Wuhuan-gongzi. He had become “that lunatic.”

“Listen.” An Long gathered his words, hoping Song Qingshi would be guarded when it came to him. “In a secret realm, he—”

Without warning, someone barged into range of An Long’s spiritual senses, interrupting him.

Yue Wuhuan had brought a new pot of tea and a platter of snacks.

“An-xianzun, what interesting stories are you telling?” He smiled and poured a cup of tea.

An Long hadn’t expected his bugs to keep Yue Wuhuan for long. Since he’d showed his face, An Long readied an insult—

“Were you concerned about my condition?” Yue Wuhuan asked.

An Long’s words stuck in his throat. He looked at Song Qingshi, who was standing confused at his side, then back at the crazy demon. He could not speak of the insane things Yue Wuhuan had done, could he? Otherwise, he’d be revealing to Song Qingshi that Yue Wuhuan had not actually improved.

Yue Wuhuan’s mental condition was very important to Song Qingshi. If he found out Yue Wuhuan hadn’t recovered, he would never change his opinion of him. He’d only love and care for him even harder.

An Long ground his teeth and decided to rearrange his words: Fine, he wouldn’t say Yue Wuhuan was insane; he was just evil and vicious!

Yue Wuhuan topped off Song Qingshi’s cup, clucking over the bite mark that had appeared on his arm. “I found some purple cloud ginseng in a secret realm, a few days ago. It’s very nutritious. Shall I cook something for you with it?”

An Long was thwarted again. Yue Wuhuan truly had behaved like someone searching for medicine, not a madman. Anyway, if he’d been lying about helping, the jig would’ve been up when Song Qingshi woke up.

Had Yue Wuhuan harmed Song Qingshi, An Long would have known what to do. Instead, Song Qingshi was sitting there, perfectly fine, all thanks to this demon. What was An Long supposed to do, lodge a complaint or ask for a pat on the head for Yue Wuhuan? In the immortal realm, killing someone was so insignificant it wasn't worth mentioning.

An Long had a bigger body count than Yue Wuhuan, anyway…

He couldn't even capitalize on the injuries he'd incurred trying to force his way into the Medicine King's Valley. What yuanying-level cultivator would admit to that shame? Now An Long had to swallow his own bitter medicine, so bloated with anger he felt like a puffer fish with no way to air his grievances but swell up.

"He didn't do anything special in the secret realm," he said through gritted teeth. "Just searched for treasures here and there. He's doing all right. Good for him."

Yue Wuhuan sat down, looking innocent. He nodded. "Thank you, An-xianzun, for your kind words."

"You're welcome." An Long picked up his cup. "You didn't poison this, did you?"

"An-xianzun, what a funny joke," Yue Wuhuan said, though his tone said the opposite. "I haven't used such a crude method in years."

Holding the well-behaved Haolong in one hand, Song Qingshi looked back and forth between An Long and Yue Wuhuan. Even someone slow on the uptake like him could tell these two got on as well as fire and water. The mood was on life support, but he didn't know how to resuscitate it. After all, Yue Wuhuan's traps had harmed An Long; there was no way he'd just let that go. Perhaps the best way to handle the fight was to separate them?

Song Qingshi was just about to ask a servant to escort An Long to the Tranquil Mind Courtyard when he paused, sensing something was off. He noted An Long was covered in stinking mud, some of which had rubbed off on Song Qingshi's robes.

Song Qingshi's education had left him a stickler for cleanliness. He usually wore white and abhorred stains. An Long knew that well, so he always cleaned himself up before entering the Medicine King's Valley. Even when he was playing a prank on Song Qingshi, he'd never crossed that boundary.

Every cultivator knew the cleansing spell that could remove all messes in an instant; it was one of the most basic spells out there.

Why hadn't An Long used it?

Song Qingshi extended his spiritual senses…

His expression shifted a little, and he stood up with the help of Haolong. He gave An Long's vest a tug. "Xiaobai has some minor injuries. Let me show you to your rooms, and I'll treat its injuries too."

An Long's heart melted as he noticed Song Qingshi's limp. "Hey, do you need me to carry you?" He reached out a hand.

Song Qingshi shook his head and stepped onto his red lotus. "I'm not that injured. How undignified, to let you lug me around!" If he could, he liked to do things himself.

Yue Wuhuan kept his head down and tidied up the tea set on the table.

Song Qingshi dragged An Long all the way to the Tranquil Mind Courtyard where he ordered An Long to lie down.

Since Song Qingshi had figured him out, An Long didn't make excuses. He took off his black leather vest and allowed Song Qingshi to examine the wound with his good hand.

How could anyone come out of the valley's poisonous mist unscathed? And An Long had been stuck there for several days. Under the vest, dried blood mingled with dark mud stuck to his skin. Patches of black, corroded flesh covered An Long's chest and abdomen.

"Drunken bone" was one of the scarier toxins from *Nie's Book of Poison*. Its first symptom was numbness, but the victim felt more and more pain as the poison made its

way to their bones. Eventually, all the bones in the victim's body broke into pieces, until they collapsed into a puddle of flesh. Song Qingshi had never used it at all, and certainly not in the poisonous mists, thinking it too cruel.

An Long's bugs and a special antidote helped to slow the effects, but he'd gone long enough without treatment for the poison to reach bone. He'd endured it because he needed answers, and he was too stubborn to look vulnerable in front of Yue Wuhuan.

"You're always like this." Song Qingshi's power stopped the spreading poison, and he drew out the rest with his flames of the underworld. "If you cut your finger, you'll roll around begging for my help. But when you're really, seriously injured, you clam up and act like nothing's wrong. Doesn't it hurt? If this keeps going and all your bones break, I don't have a way to save you!"

An Long let Song Qingshi treat his injuries in silence. Black flames swirled, drawing out the toxin. Song Qingshi's unique constitution rendered most poisons useless. He could absorb them, then render them inert.

"He changed the poison in the mist because he wants me dead." The pain had receded, but An Long spoke heavily. "I don't blame him. Nobody in the immortal realm can be civil or reasonable. It's always a battle to the death. But now that I've made my way into the valley, he's the loser. Qingshi, I thought of twenty-eight different ways to kill him just now. You can't stop at least eight of them."

Song Qingshi stopped his fire and looked up at him, suddenly on guard.

An Long stopped him before he could speak. "I know you want to say I'm yuanying-level, so it's overkill. But Yue Wuhuan's not normal! Nobody at his level should have the strength of a cultivator with a golden core! He has those bloodking vines, there's poison coursing through his body, he has so many weird arrays and unbelievable hidden weapons, he was born with expert swordplay that no one could achieve, even with practice! And he's always scheming! If you let things go on like this, he'll be too much for me to handle!"

In the blink of an eye, Yue Wuhuan had grown from a lowly ant to someone worth his consideration. It was An Long's fault for misjudging, but he'd correct his mistake.

Yue Wuhuan might not have been a threat now, but all cultivators knew that danger needed to be eradicated early.

"But you didn't kill him," Song Qingshi murmured.

An Long closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"If I killed him, would you forgive me? Just let me go in peace?"

"I wouldn't." Song Qingshi shook his head. "He saved my life."

An Long slowly took his hand and examined the soft, new skin. "If… If I had been there, you wouldn't have gotten hurt. I'd do everything in my power to keep you safe. But you've never given me the chance."

He was powerful, fierce, tough and thick-skinned. He wasn't gentle, or obedient, and he was shameless. He could wag his tail and bark—but he was vicious as a wolf.

Song Qingshi knew he should offer some comfort, but nothing he said could help.

"It's not your fault. It's mine. I couldn't let go." An Long pulled him into his arms, buried his face in Song Qingshi's neck, and inhaled. It was a longing breath. Finally, he let out a pained whimper.

"This is my punishment. Qingshi, it hurts."

Chapter 39

SONG QINGSHI HAD NEVER seen An Long like this; he was at a loss for what to do. After removing the poison from An Long's body, he spent an hour pretending to be a teddy bear. He didn't dare speak or move.

In the end, An Long reluctantly let him go.

Haolong was fine, just exhausted. Song Qingshi asked the kitchen to prepare it a large number of raw eggs and reminded An Long not to drink, not even medicated wine.

When Song Qingshi returned to Fuling Palace, it was midnight. His newly restored body ached, and so did his heart.

Yue Wuhuan sat on the steps, waiting for him. He cocked his head at Song Qingshi, but he didn't say anything.

"Did I keep you up?" Song Qingshi was happy to see him, but he wanted to bathe. An Long's cuddling had left him covered in mud, and even the cleansing spell couldn't get rid of the swampy stench.

Yue Wuhuan brought him a new set of inner robes and set them outside the bathroom door. Song Qingshi sank into the warm bath and pondered An Long's behavior. He felt a little lost.

An Long didn't *like* him, did he?

Song Qingshi was quick to discard this absurd guess. He didn't have many social graces, but even if he'd never seen a pig before, he'd eaten pork. His sister in his other life was a beautiful, rich goddess; a line of her admirers could stretch for blocks, each of them eager to please her. Some had tried to get on his good side, plying him with practice tests and interesting books in the hope that he'd put in a good word for them.

No one with a crush would act like An Long—causing trouble, throwing out insults…

An Long was clearly just a good friend who wasn't afraid of a little roughhousing!

Plenty of Song Qingshi's schoolmates had fought even harder than this. They might curse each other up and down, but they still slung their arms around each other's shoulders and hugged it out at the end of the day. They gave each other rude nicknames, drank together, went to the baths together, and made fun of each other… None of that stopped them from finding girlfriends—actually, they were almost like different people for their girlfriends, each man more obedient than the last.

Five hundred years ago, An Long had dragged Song Qingshi out for some fun. And of course, it was An Long who spotted a pretty girl and wolf whistled to get her attention. He told Song Qingshi to take a good look, since he had so much to learn about flirting. Song Qingshi held no interest in such things and rebuffed An Long, but he refused to drop the act and continued calling out to girls.

Gentle and pure, hot and sultry, petite and cute, tall and dignified, exotic and foreign, classic and elegant, refined ladies and travel-weary pearls—thanks to An Long, Song Qingshi had never seen so many beautiful women!

Song Qingshi could appreciate beauty just fine. Everyone liked beautiful things, right? However, he looked at them with respect and treated them with courtesy. He didn't want to come off as a pervert, and he really didn't want the women to group him with An Long.

In the end, the mob of offended beauties had chased them down the streets with weapons. Because he and An Long were in the wrong, he couldn't even fight back! It would forever be the most embarrassing thing that ever happened to him.

He'd beaten An Long like a dog in the aftermath, but it still wasn't enough to appease his anger.

An Long, meanwhile, showed no regret. "If you don't like women, does that mean you like men?" he asked, hooting with laughter.

The question threw Song Qingshi for a loop. He considered.

Only cultivation and research held his attention. His heart was pure and did not stir with desire. He'd never fallen for someone, so he'd never questioned his sexual orientation. How could he know the answer? He tried to picture someone he'd like but came up blank.

After deliberating for a while, he realized that An Long had led him astray again. He was planning on cultivating emptiness. Why was he worrying about this?

An Long persisted. "Well, what kind of men do you like? Xilin guys treat our partners great. We act tough on the outside, but we all obey our wives. Tell us to jump, we'll ask how high. Make us kneel on the washboard once, and you'll never need to break out the board of nails… Thinking about it? I'll find a good one for you. You'll have him whipped for sure."

He wore an annoying expression, like he was just waiting to laugh at Song Qingshi.

Song Qingshi hated this topic, and he hated being the punch line. He didn't want to deal with this stupid dog or his stupid jokes, so he ran back to the Medicine King's Valley and locked himself in the library for many days. It wasn't until An Long swore on his ancestors that he'd never do such obnoxious things or bring up romance again that Song Qingshi finally, reluctantly forgave him.

An Long knew he'd made a mistake and behaved himself for a long time.

Then Song Qingshi reached the yuanying level and began to cultivate emptiness.

The path of emptiness didn't actually affect his life or friendships. He just had to free himself of love and lust and dedicate himself to cultivation. After Song Qingshi started cultivating emptiness, he was never tormented by inner demons, and he no longer worried about love or relationships. His cultivation improved quickly, without obstacles. He had made the right decision. This path suited him best.

But when An Long found out, he had thrown a huge, crazed fit. He screamed and spat curses, and slammed the door on his way out.

Song Qingshi nursed that grievance for a long time.

Once his anger faded, he was a little worried. Ye Lin surveilled An Long at Song Qingshi's request, but all he received was the news that An Long was out flirting with all kinds of women, living his best life.

After the two of them made up and resumed their correspondence, a bunch of female cultivators had swarmed the entrance to the Medicine King's Valley, disturbing his research. An Long had tricked them into coming. Song Qingshi wanted to kick An Long's ass himself. What a heartless straight bastard!

Song Qingshi sat up in the hot spring. He was definitely overthinking things!

In what world would An Long give up on slender sirens for a boring man like him? He wasn't a beauty like Yue Wuhuan. Was An Long stupid?

No, he'd probably just gotten into a snit because he'd been seriously injured by a foundation-level cultivator, and he was too proud to admit embarrassment. To be honest, if Song Qingshi had earned a lower exam score than someone from an earlier grade, he'd cry too.

He'd just ease up on An Long for now. No more burning him on a whim. Song Qingshi would give An Long some time to calm down and tackle the drunken-bone poison.

Having reviewed the problems in his head, Song Qingshi got out of the hot spring, draped his robes over himself, and returned to his rooms to rest.

Yue Wuhuan was waiting outside the door. He frowned and reached out to scrub at the bite mark that still remained on Song Qingshi's neck.

"Zunzhu, you bruise too easily," Yue Wuhuan said regretfully. "It won't go away. If you go out like this, people will laugh…"

"I'll put some medicine on it when I get back. It'll be gone by tomorrow, promise." Song Qingshi sounded glum. "That stupid dog. He just does this when he's angry. I won't let him bite me for no reason again."

"An-xianzun likes to bite?"

“This is nothing. You haven’t seen him go wild and break somebody’s neck with his teeth yet,” Song Qingshi grumbled.

Yue Wuhuan gave a pleasant nod and smile, then guided Song Qingshi to his rooms. Yue Wuhuan’s vines brought out bruise ointment and gently applied a thick layer over the bite marks. He only stopped after the white ointment covered the bite mark completely, then he massaged Song Qingshi’s stiff limbs.

He’d removed his golden mask. Under the light of the luminous pearls, a dark glow seemed to hide in his beautiful phoenix eyes. He pursed his lips, hesitant to speak the next words.

“I was wrong to use drunken bone in the poisonous mist. I knew An-xianzun was poisoned but didn’t say anything, and that was wrong too. And An-xianzun’s problems end up as yours, Zunzhu. That’s even more my fault…”

Song Qingshi stopped him. “No, it’s not.”

Although their conflict had stemmed from a misunderstanding, in the immortal realm, fights usually ended in death. Apologies were unnecessary.

Besides, Yue Wuhuan had seemed fine at first, but how could he have escaped An Long’s violent siege unscathed? Realizing that, Song Qingshi hurriedly examined Yue Wuhuan with his spiritual senses. He found old wounds that hadn’t healed, scars that had, and an alarming mark that wound and twisted up the meridians in Yue Wuhuan’s leg all the way to his heart—the traces left by An Long’s heart-eater worm.

The heart-eater was small but swift, so it was hard to stop its progression. Victims had to cut open their own flesh without the luxury of anesthetic and pierce their meridians one by one to find it. If they were unlucky or slow, and the bug reached their heart, hesitation meant a painful death. The creature was one of An Long’s cruelest. It promised a slim chance for survival, but there weren’t many cultivators who had ever managed it.

Yue Wuhuan didn’t want to say anything.

Song Qingshi seethed. He'd tear that Alaskan malamute apart! He stood up—then remembered the even crueler fate that An Long had nearly suffered from the drunken-bone poison. Song Qingshi's head cleared again. He sat back down, breathed deep, smothered his rage down, and tried to balance the equation.

Drunken-bone poison. Heart-eater worm. Neither attack could be forgiven, so Yue Wuhuan and An Long were now mortal enemies. This had only happened because they both wanted to save him…

Song Qingshi's careful consideration led him to one conclusion: He was the problem.

He felt guilty. He looked at Yue Wuhuan, then thought of An Long. He'd never faced such a complicated situation. It might be even more painful than tribulation lightning. He would have preferred to suffer both the poison and the worm himself instead.

He couldn't help but feel a little biased toward his understanding little angel, who had done so much. But that wasn't fair.

If he insisted on protecting Yue Wuhuan, An Long would nurse a grudge. If anyone learned that the Master of the Thousand Poison Sect had been harmed, both sects' reputations would suffer. He didn't want things to get that far; it would be worse for Yue Wuhuan. It was no longer any one individual's fault. Better he quelled An Long's anger somehow, got him to stop digging, and they all kept this a secret. After that, Song Qingshi only needed to keep the two separate and let time do its work.

But what injustices would his little angel have to face?

Yue Wuhuan tried to comfort him in a soft voice. "Zunzhu, don't worry. I'll go apologize to An-xianzun. We can put an end to this."

"No!" Song Qingshi said immediately. "You weren't wrong, so you shouldn't apologize!"

An Long could be cruel to people he disliked. Song Qingshi couldn't allow his little angel to suffer.

“If you’re worried, then it’s my fault,” Yue Wuhuan said piously. He placed a gentle kiss on Song Qingshi’s palm, then tucked a long, wavy lock of hair behind his ear.

Song Qingshi’s hand itched like a feather was tickling him. His ears burned. Good thing his hair was down, covering them up. His heart hammered, and he pulled away.

“You weren’t wrong,” he insisted.

Yue Wuhuan smiled. “I can admit to fault, even if I wasn’t wrong. I got used to that a long time ago.”

He always had to admit fault on Golden Phoenix Mountain, no matter what he’d done. Even if he had been raped, he still had to kneel and take the blame. He could no longer tell kindness from cruelty, right from wrong. Power was a virtue, and weakness was a sin. Whoever survived won, and whoever died lost. In order to reach his goals, there was nothing he wouldn’t do.

He could end someone’s life as easily as he admitted fault to anyone. To him, there was no difference between the two. Those who found out said he wasn’t in his right mind, that he was a lunatic. He had killed everyone in the valley who knew but couldn’t keep their mouth shut.

Shush. Hide it better. Wouldn’t it be a problem for Zunzhu to discover this secret?

Yue Wuhuan could smother the monstrous desire in his heart; he could temper his madness; he could tolerate that drooling, foul wolf too. He would wear a harmless smile and keep his murderous intent under cover of darkness until the right opportunity presented itself. There were too many things he wanted; he couldn’t rush it. He had to weave the net and set each trap before the prey could fall in.

He smiled while looking at Song Qingshi with doting, gentle eyes.

“Wuhuan…” Song Qingshi was emotional from the way Yue Wuhuan looked at him. He thought long and hard before continuing. “You don’t need to do these things for me. I’m your shizun, even if I’m not a very good one. I don’t know anything that’s not

medicine or research, I've never accomplished anything great, and I abandoned my responsibilities to you for ten years. You've suffered so much because of—"

Yue Wuhuan interrupted him. "No, *you* did. You took that lightning for my sake."

Song Qingshi wasn't the best speaker, but he felt he should crawl out of his ivory tower and learn to handle complicated human relationships. He covered Yue Wuhuan's mouth, afraid that he couldn't win in an argument.

"A good shizun *should* endure a tribulation in his disciple's place," he said stubbornly. "I didn't prepare for the danger you'd face establishing your foundation, I didn't predict how intense the tribulation would be, and I didn't adjust my yuanying accordingly. I panicked. That's why I suffered such a serious injury and fell unconscious."

Yue Wuhuan froze. The touch of Song Qingshi's warm palm to his lips filled him with quiet joy, and he stared at Song Qingshi with a weighty expression.

"All right," Yue Wuhuan rasped eventually.

He helped Song Qingshi draw the green silk curtains around his bed, extinguished the luminous pearls, then donned his mask.

Before he left, a sheepish voice emerged from the dark recesses of the bed.

"Wuhuan, don't be afraid. I'll…I'll do my best to protect you."

It would be difficult for Yue Wuhuan to find happiness and break the chains that bound him to his past, but Song Qingshi would do his best to assist. He wasn't the best or brightest when it came to interpersonal relationships, and he was a clumsy speaker, but he'd never give up. No matter how hard the question, no matter how many times he failed—even a thousand times—he would find the right answer.

Yue Wuhuan looked at the silhouette behind the curtains. He'd spent days and nights by Song Qingshi's side, cleaning and changing his dressings, until he'd memorized the lines of his body, how every inch of his skin felt under his hands. He could imagine how enticing Song Qingshi looked right now, even if he couldn't see. He

used the lock bug to suppress his burning desire. Though he had to force his heart to quiet, his voice stayed exceedingly gentle.

"I know."

A long red vine slowly reached past the curtains and curled around Song Qingshi's pale foot, like a snare that he could easily escape from.

"It'll keep you company. It's hard for you to move. If you need me, just pull." For a moment, Yue Wuhuan couldn't check his greed. This was his most precious stone, perfect and clean. He would keep a constant vigil over it. No one could ever steal it away from him.

"Good night."

Chapter 40

QINGLUAN ARRIVED at Zixuan Hall near Fuling Palace late in the night. After the Medicine King had declared it insufficient, the old study now served as a storage room.

Yue Wuhuan reorganized and repaired it after he took over the valley's administration, and it had returned to its purpose.

He sat at the desk reading letters. Underneath his mask, there was a hint of joy on his lips.

But after many failed attempts, Qingluan no longer tried to guess Yue Wuhuan's thoughts from his expression. His smile might hide murderous rage, or his fury might cover a scheme. He was putting on an act at all times. Only the occasional glints of madness were real.

No one dared face his madness.

Qingluan bowed nervously, then straightened up and awaited her orders.

The bloodking vines presented a small wooden box containing an unused life bead.

She accepted the gift. Yue Wuhuan did not need such a thing to control someone's heart. He had kept it as a mere token of her loyalty. He had spun a web over the Medicine King's Valley that guarded the treasure within Fuling Palace. He'd eradicated all threats, and everything was within his control. No secret could get past him.

Yue Wuhuan looked to where Qingluan stood, still waiting. "Is there something else?"

"Wuhuan-ge," she said, then hesitated uneasily. She knew what he'd done to the poisonous mist, and why An Long was so furious. "Please tell me how I should deal with An-xianzun."

Yue Wuhuan put down the letter in his hand. "Treat him like an important guest."

“An-xianzun entered the valley so aggressively. He doesn’t have good intentions.”

Yue Wuhuan laughed. “You think I’m afraid that he’ll kill me?”

Qingluan stared at her own feet rather than answer.

“You’ve underestimated him.” Yue Wuhuan could spare some patience for a loyal, capable subordinate. “The Thousand Poison Sect decides its successor the same way they refine their bugs. After the sect leader dies, nine of his closest disciples fight to the death. The last one standing inherits the leader’s knowledge and powers. An Long joined the sect the last, but he killed eight of his senior disciples. He used his inheritance to bathe the Thousand Poison Sect in blood, annihilated anyone that questioned him, and went on to conquer all of Xilin.”

Qingluan shivered. She hated sect infighting.

“He doesn’t act on impulse,” Yue Wuhuan explained. “If he fought his way into the Medicine King’s Valley and immediately killed *me*, Song Qingshi’s head disciple—he’d destroy the valley’s reputation. Zunzhu would never let that go. In his state, is there a reason for him to anger Zunzhu, only to die with me?”

“But Zunzhu has already treated him for poison…” Qingluan trailed off. She wasn’t stupid. If An Long hadn’t resorted to violence when he was angry, he wouldn’t after calming down.

“He can kill me whenever he wants.” Yue Wuhuan shook his head and sneered. “The immortal realm is full of powerful people. If he wants me dead, he doesn’t need to do the deed himself. Why not pay someone? First, he’ll pretend to be weak and obedient, and once Zunzhu lets down his guard enough to patch him up, he’ll leave. After that, he’ll find a way to kill me sneakily or hire someone. That’s what I’d do, if I were him.”

Afterward, he could even kill the killer and gain Song Qingshi’s favor by offering him the head. Why not kill two birds with one stone?

Yue Wuhuan had released An Long from the valley's traps and restrained the poison puppets once Song Qingshi was awake for a similar reason. There was no need to anger him over trifling matters and spoil their joyous reunion.

"An Long's a smart man." Yue Wuhuan shook his head regretfully.

The vine around Song Qingshi's foot twitched as he tossed and turned; clearly, they had the same concerns. Since Song Qingshi was so worried about Yue Wuhuan and An Long's "misunderstanding," of course they'd have to "fix" it.

Yue Wuhuan had planned many ways to bait An Long into killing him, but now the cost outweighed the benefit. How unfortunate.

"Wuhuan-ge, aren't you afraid of danger?" Qingluan asked.

"Of course. It scares me to death." Yue Wuhuan couldn't help but chuckle as he considered her question. In the quiet darkness, the throaty sound teetered on the edge of madness. "If I'm in danger, Zunzhu will worry. He'll stay by my side, day and night, to protect me."

He could look forward to that.

Yue Wuhuan's smile sent a shiver down Qingluan's spine.

Back at Fuling Palace, Song Qingshi sighed restlessly as he rolled around his bed.

He wasn't childish enough to expect Yue Wuhuan and An Long to forget their grudges and become friends. His only solution to the problem was to hope they stopped trying to kill each other. Even so, that seemed unlikely: An Long was vengeful. He would say one thing but do another. If he promised not to kill Yue Wuhuan then did it anyway—the old "asking for forgiveness instead of permission" trick—there was nothing Song Qingshi could do. Killing An Long at that point would not bring Yue Wuhuan back.

Yue Wuhuan was a little angel, willing to endure anything for Song Qingshi's sake. He obviously resented An Long's use of the heart-eater worm, or he wouldn't

have retaliated with the drunken-bone poison. Song Qingshi couldn't let someone as well-behaved and obedient as Yue Wuhuan suffer in silence. Why shouldn't Yue Wuhuan defend himself when he was attacked?

If a disciple made a mistake, it was the teacher's responsibility as well. Besides, his disciple *hadn't* made a mistake, so he shouldn't have to admit to it.

If An Long needed to vent, Song Qingshi could always let him beat him up. He was a yuanying-level cultivator. He could at least take more than Yue Wuhuan.

Song Qingshi considered that iffy method for a long time, but he decided there was no way it would succeed.

He could give something to An Long to encourage him to forget the matter, but the Thousand Poison Sect was a lot richer than the Medicine King's Valley. What did he have to offer besides medicines and elixirs?

The next day, as Song Qingshi struggled out of bed, he realized Yue Wuhuan hadn't come to see him. He cleaned himself with the vines' help before he sought out An Long.

Song Qingshi would lay all his cards on the table and ask what it would take for An Long to forget this whole affair. If nothing satisfied An Long, he'd start defensive preparations.

But when he reached the garden pavilion, he saw the pair playing weiqi.[2] They were in a fine mood, chatting and laughing together.

Song Qingshi rubbed his eyes, feeling like he was dreaming.

Yue Wuhuan glanced at his messy hair, then smiled and bowed. "I would've seen to you this morning, Zunzhu, but An-xianzun roped me into a game."

"Didn't *you* ask *me*?" An Long stared at the board. After a moment's consideration, he made a move. "Your turn."

Song Qingshi walked over and squinted at the board. An Long played black, Yue Wuhuan white. He wasn't that familiar with the game, but he could tell that they were

like two dragons locked at each other's throats. Black had the advantage, however slight.

"It's not fun without stakes," An Long said. "Let's bet on something!"

Yue Wuhuan made his move. "What will you wager, An-xianzun?"

"You're just not allowed to bet the valley!" Song Qingshi always got trounced when he played An Long, so he knew how good he was. He could cushion the loss for his little angel, at least. "Whoever loses…has to stick a note on his forehead!"

That's what his upperclassmen did when they played cards.

Yue Wuhuan and An Long stared at him.

"My house, my rules!" Song Qingshi insisted.

He sat between the two of them, leaning into the stone table. He didn't like watching weiqi, so he stared at the back-and-forth between the black and white pieces without focusing. Instead, he wondered whether the Alaskan malamute was lying to him again, or was Yue Wuhuan hiding something from him to keep him from worrying?

The game took an unexpected turn: The black dragon fell into a trap, and the white dragon readied a killing blow.

Yue Wuhuan's bait was like the poisonous mist shrouding the Medicine King's Valley. Every step looked harmless, but just as An Long thought he had the upper hand, the dragon revealed its fangs.

Anger flared in An Long's heart. The more he thought about it, the angrier he grew. He narrowed his eyes. Yue Wuhuan met his murderous gaze with a smile.

"You're not allowed to cheat," Song Qingshi chided An Long.

"But your disciple is bullying me." An Long eyed Song Qingshi, then pulled him to his side with a grin. "As bros, we stick together through thick and thin. Since you mentioned it, if I lose, I'll put the note on *your* forehead!"

Song Qingshi was trying to make An Long happy anyway, so he agreed.

Yue Wuhuan's hand hovered over the board—before he set his piece down in a different spot than he'd initially intended.

The game dragged on for an hour with a brutal struggle on both sides. In the end, the black dragon won by a mere half point.

Song Qingshi was a man of his word. He offered Yue Wuhuan a slip of red paper. "Where do you want to stick it?"

"Wherever Zunzhu wants," Yue Wuhuan said with a chuckle.

"All right." He didn't want to stick it on the mask, so he arranged it on Yue Wuhuan's cheek like a whisker. "Let me get it straight, so it looks better." He leaned closer, fussing over the position.

Yue Wuhuan squirmed—"Zunzhu, it tickles!"—and the slip of paper ended up crooked.

"Stop moving." Song Qingshi readjusted it.

An Long looked from shameless demon to stupid fool. He'd rather eat all the pieces than listen to what sounded too much like flirting. He'd never dated and didn't know this was an option. He'd lost big time!

"There." Song Qingshi said, satisfied at last. "What's up with you two?"

An Long affected a jovial voice. "We had to get to know each other by exchanging blows. With the heart-eater worm and drunken-bone poison, we're now even."

"I truly admire how forgiving An-xianzun is." Yue Wuhuan lowered his head again.

"Never mind, it's not your fault." An Long waved a hand. "You did it to save Qingshi. I jumped to conclusions and acted rashly."

Yue Wuhuan smiled. "An-xianzun acted on Zunzhu's behalf as well. If I'd known your intentions, I would've thrown open the gates of the valley to welcome you ages ago."

“It’s shocking how much you’re capable of at your young age,” An Long said.

Yue Wuhuan praised him right back. “I was lucky to escape with my life because An-xianzun showed mercy.”

The two of them went back and forth like old friends, their laughter unceasing.

Song Qingshi, totally extraneous, stood to one side. He lacked knowledge on emotions and feelings. In that moment, he decided he needed to brush up on the lessons he’d missed.

When Song Qingshi was faced with a question he didn’t know the answer to, he liked to look for the answer in books. But the immortal realm hadn’t developed the discipline of psychology or a practicum for human relations. The Medicine King’s Valley certainly didn’t have any books on making friends. What was he to do?

It occurred to him, after a while, that novels often described emotions. Perhaps he could refer to those?

He wrote to Ye Lin and attached a spiritual crystal. He asked him to find him some books on relationships between men, with sincere emotions, the more realistic the better.

Cash in hand, Ye Lin quickly got to work. He mailed the novel he kept at his bedside to Song Qingshi, saying it was a recent best-seller. It depicted exciting, brotherly affections between men who had forged such close bonds they were willing to sacrifice themselves for each other. The characters were loyal, righteous, and went to the ends of the earth for each other. Readers just couldn’t put the book down, devouring page after page.

Song Qingshi cradled his copy of *The Three Tiger-Fighting Brothers* like a treasure.

Ye Lin had satisfied another customer.

Chapter 41

XUNFANG-ZHENREN'S *The Three Tiger-Fighting Brothers* covered three published volumes, and the story wasn't complete yet.

The story went as follows: When a kind, cute talisman cultivator first started his journey, he met a haughty, cold sword cultivator whose charming exterior concealed a penchant for cruelty, then a flirtatious demonic cultivator. The three of them survived many life-or-death situations together, and after defeating a tiger yao with nine lives, they went from enemies to friends. From then on, they travelled the jianghu doing heroic deeds.

Xunfang-zhenren's vivid prose filled the otherwise-simple adventure with exciting turns. There were temptresses and beauties, treasures and rare beasts, and the romance of men. All the characters were well-rounded and so bold they leaped off the page, especially in the lively scene where the trio set aside their past grudges and drank to their hearts' content.

Song Qingshi curled up in his blankets with a luminous pearl. He ignored the vines tightening around his ankle to remind him to sleep. He had a book to finish.

At last, he understood the joys of fiction.

The talisman cultivator had just suffered a grievous injury from the tiger yao, and the sword cultivator summoned tens of thousands of swords to save him in a heart-wrenching bloodbath at the peak of Changfeng Mountain. Song Qingshi teetered on the edge of his seat when a cold, wet something suddenly slid up his leg. He threw back his blankets. Haolong had climbed into bed, and it was trying to gnaw through the bloodking vines to reclaim its rightful roost.

"Behave!" Song Qingshi pried the snake's needle-sharp fangs away from the battered vine, then picked up Haolong and scolded it. "This is not a rope. No biting."

Haolong looped itself around his waist, circling him a few times. Then it leaned into his chest like it wasn't about to leave.

“Never mind. You can stay for tonight. You’re a lot heavier than before,” Song Qingshi said, both annoyed and amused. He shook his foot. “Wuhuan, don’t squeeze me so tightly. I’m fine.”

The vine loosened but remained in place.

Song Qingshi didn’t understand why Yue Wuhuan had to wrap the vine around him instead of keeping it at his bedside. Yue Wuhuan hadn’t managed an answer when he asked, just looked embarrassed and just couldn’t get the words out. Song Qingshi guessed that Yue Wuhuan had gotten so used to caring for him over the ten years he’d been unconscious, he now felt uneasy when they were apart. The bloodking vine satisfied his need for attention.

Even if his little angel had some weird habits, Song Qingshi would still dote on him. What was one vine? He could take seven or eight, no problem!

Song Qingshi patted Haolong’s head and continued reading. As he grew more and more immersed, he even got out of bed to grab a notebook and a charcoal pencil so he could track the main plot points. He shared his thoughts with Haolong while he wrote.

“The characters in this book are written so well. Their dynamic is *so* relatable. I feel like Yue Wuhuan is the kind, cute talisman cultivator, An Long is the flirtatious demonic cultivator, and I’m the haughty, cold sword cultivator! We started off in conflict, but as we fought together, we got to know each other, then had adventures…”

(Yue Wuhuan listened through the vine. “What?”)

(An Long listened through Haolong. “Huh?”)

Song Qingshi quickly saw the direction his own group needed to head in the future: He would drag Yue Wuhuan and An Long on an adventure. The fun things they’d run into during their travels would deepen their bonds of brotherhood. South Sea City wasn’t far from the Medicine King’s Valley, and it was having its Flower Festival. The wushou flowers would be in full bloom, and he could purchase some ingredients during their visit. Seafaring merchants sold precious gems in the market, which suited Yue

Wuhuan. And while it was small, South Sea City was famous for its wine and its beauties—exactly what An Long liked.

Even if his plan failed, they'd still enjoy themselves at such a fun place, right? Of course, before they left, he'd have them read this novel so they knew what a strong brotherhood looked like. Then they'd appreciate his efforts.

Yue Wuhuan accepted the book obediently the very next day.

"It must be good, since Zunzhu says so."

"I read that book ages ago," An Long grumbled.

He couldn't stop thinking about what he'd heard the night before. He just couldn't wrap his head around it, so he had to ask: "I'm the demonic cultivator, fine. But why is *he* the talisman cultivator, and why are *you* the sword cultivator?"

Since when was his little Qingshi haughty, cold, or cruel? Where was that fiend Yue Wuhuan cute or kind? He should just die!

"The sword cultivator is the oldest and most responsible, so he's the gege," Song Qingshi said assertively. "The talisman cultivator is the youngest and needs to be taken care of, so he's the didi.[3] I'm the oldest, you're in the middle, and Wuhuan is the youngest. What's the problem?"

His answer was logical; An Long couldn't argue.

"How did you even know about that?" He was asking about something Song Qingshi had said to himself in the middle of the night. Song Qingshi grabbed Haolong and searched it scale by scale until he uncovered a tiny eavesdrop bug. Flames burst from his palms. He threw them furiously at An Long.

"How dare you try to listen to my dreams again?!"

It wasn't the first time! Not only had An Long spied on Song Qingshi, he'd laughed at him for hugging the blankets *and* for sleep-reciting *The Book of Medicine*. He'd then said Song Qingshi should hug something warm like a man instead.

He wasn't a woman, so what would he hug a man for? How dare An Long imply that he was acting girly!

The more Song Qingshi thought about it, the angrier he became. The red lotus blaze in his hands burned bigger and brighter by the moment. There were still a few days before they headed out. He didn't mind giving An Long something to recover from as well.

An Long covered his head as he ducked and dodged. He twisted around, only to see Yue Wuhuan standing to the side like he wasn't involved.

"He was listening too! Why are you only burning me?!"

Yue Wuhuan, the accused party, chuckled and lowered the novel in his hands. "I reported the bloodking vines to Zunzhu from the start."

"How dare you try to drag him down with you!" Song Qingshi shouted. Why wouldn't An Long ever acknowledge his misdeeds? "It's a little difficult to move around right now, so Wuhuan left a vine to take care of me. Why did *you* send Xiaobai to spy on me?!"

"Well, I heard you two got cozy all the time before your accident," An Long sputtered, feeling sorry for himself.

"It's not like I haven't done the same for you!" Song Qingshi didn't understand why An Long felt wronged. "Remember when you were here with serious injuries? Didn't I stay by your side because you couldn't move? Once you recovered a bit, you wouldn't stop thrashing in your sleep. That was the only reason I switched to another bed."

Wasn't sleeping beside a seriously ill patient the most natural thing in the world?

An Long had an entire stomach full of arguments but nothing to say. He could only reap the embarrassment his younger self had sowed. There was no coming back from this.

"How did you know I slept by Wuhuan, anyway?" Song Qingshi asked suspiciously.

Yue Wuhuan had removed An Long's numerous spies from the Medicine King's Valley, so his information wasn't up to date. But he couldn't let Song Qingshi know about any of that. An Long had no excuses prepared for an interrogation, so he'd be put on the black list and thrown out of the valley for sure.

The fire cupped in his palms flickered in and out of existence.

An Long made a split-second decision and pulled over Yue Wuhuan, who had thus far maintained the appearance of innocence. "He told me!"

Yue Wuhuan glanced at him and smiled.

"We had a nice chat after making up, and it happened to come up." An Long's face was sincere, but his grip on Yue Wuhuan's shoulder could've shattered bone. Despite the threat, his tone was pleading. "I thought you guys were having fun without me, so I sent Xiaobai to listen in. Right, Wuhuan-di? Didn't we talk about this?"

Top forensic investigator Song Qingshi always found the cause of death. An Long used bugs while Yue Wuhuan preferred poison. Neither method was easy to conceal, and neither of them wanted to anger Song Qingshi or damage the way he saw them. Cultivators led long lives, so they all played the long game. Even if An Long and Yue Wuhuan hated each other enough to tear one another apart with their teeth, they had to wait for the right moment. Otherwise, even victory wouldn't save their reputation, rendering the murder meaningless.

Besides, if Song Qingshi's misgivings increased and he examined them closely, their other secrets might be exposed. They both had a lot of those…

An Long knew Yue Wuhuan thought the same—he was, in fact, even more careful. He'd never show a hint of cobra tail. So An Long had extended an olive branch.

"An-xianzun is right," Yue Wuhuan said, ignoring the pain in his shoulder as he completed An Long's lie. "I probably mentioned it during our chat. I can't believe he still remembers. Now that I've recovered, Zunzhu no longer keeps me company in bed, nor would I do anything fun with him there. Please don't snoop again, An-xianzun."

Song Qingshi was baffled. “What else can you do in bed other than sleep and read?”

“Exactly, Zunzhu,” Yue Wuhuan said fondly.

An Long stared into Song Qingshi’s clear eyes, exasperated. For some reason, though, it soon dissipated—even his ire toward Yue Wuhuan. He shouldn’t have expected anything from a fool who cultivated emptiness. What hope was there for An Long, if an unparalleled beauty like Yue Wuhuan couldn’t entice Song Qingshi into bed?

For Song Qingshi to understand these things, An Long would have to repeat the steps he’d once taken within an illusion: forcing desire onto Song Qingshi through coercion, intimidation, control, and whatever else it took. That shy, budding flower would have to taste pleasure before it could bloom into its most beautiful state.

An Long closed his eyes and leashed his malice. When he thought of that illusion, he wanted to sink his teeth into the pure creature before him and tear him up. But if he did that, he’d only hurt Song Qingshi.

He couldn’t slip up. He couldn’t ruin what he’d struggled to achieve.

Yue Wuhuan’s gentle voice brought him back to the present. “An-xianzun, are you coming to South Sea City with Zunzhu?”

An Long opened his eyes and looked at Song Qingshi, whose eyes brimmed with anticipation.

“If you’re going, then so am I,” An Long said. His grin revealed his glimmering canines.

Of the near-thousand years Song Qingshi had spent cultivating, he had stayed home for at least nine hundred. He spent the leftover century foraging for medicinal herbs deep in the mountains or a secret realm. An Long could count on his fingers the times Song Qingshi had accompanied him for some fun, and he had certainly never suggested it himself. What a treat to look forward to! How could he forfeit such a fantastic opportunity to that demon?

“Wuhuan-xiaodi,[4] what are we, strangers?” An Long leaned against Yue Wuhuan’s shoulder. “Come on, no more ‘Xianzun.’ Call me ‘Dage.’”[5]

Yue Wuhuan acquiesced with a smile. “Of course, An-dage.”

Song Qingshi felt delighted and hopeful. Their relationship clearly wasn’t as bad as he’d feared. He would ask Ye Lin for a guide to the delicious food, good wine, and beautiful scenery in South Sea City. Fun activities and good conversation might help them see one another’s good side. They might even resolve their differences in the end.

After all, why should three men as smart as them fight? Wasn’t studying together the better option?

Chapter 42

THE BEST-CASE SCENARIO was that they didn't enjoy themselves. The worst-case scenario was that they'd never speak again. It all depended on the planning. Song Qingshi was a serious, responsible person. Such a tragedy wasn't on his itinerary.

He scoured the library for information on South Sea City and read through everything. Then he wrote a letter to Ye Lin, asking him to purchase books on its culture, myths, and geography they'd encounter on the way to South Sea City. He was determined to be a gold-ranked tour guide. If his companions had nothing to complain about, nothing could go wrong.

The only thing Yue Wuhuan asked of Song Qingshi during this time was that he submit to a massage on the left side of his body three times a day to speed his recovery.

Song Qingshi was a model patient who obeyed doctor's orders. He lay in the cloister outside Fuling Palace, holding a well-behaved Haolong who was basking in the warm sun. As he received his massage, he quickly scratched notes on a sheet of paper:

Yue Wuhuan is very particular about cleanliness. Pay special attention to food safety and bring our own bedding and eating utensils.

An Long is a rowdy drunk. Find somewhere quiet so innocent passersby don't suffer if he wants to imbibe.

Yue Wuhuan hates being harassed. Keep an eye out for perverts and get rid of them quickly.

Don't let An Long go too far with the local beauties. If anything comes up, put some distance between him and Yue Wuhuan (for his reputation's sake).

"Ahh!" Pain lanced through Song Qingshi's arm. He frowned over his shoulder at the doglike culprit who'd yanked him out of heaven.

For some reason, An Long seemed to think massaging Song Qingshi was quite fun, so he'd stolen Yue Wuhuan's rehabilitation work from him.

“Can’t you be a little gentler?” Song Qingshi complained. His arm and thighs had gone black and blue, and they ached quite a bit.

He had wanted to reject the Alaskan malamute’s “loving” attentions, but he worried it would start another fight. Relitigation opened Yue Wuhuan to further criticism, so Song Qingshi had just gritted his teeth and borne it.

“You should be grateful.” An Long dropped Song Qingshi’s arm and pulled his leg over his knee. No proper masseur would look so happy to pinch each one of Song Qingshi’s toes. “You should be delighted that I, the master of the Thousand Poison Sect, am deigning to give you a massage. When will you get better if you only rely on Yue-xiaodi? He’s not forceful enough. His pressure’s too gentle.”

“I like his gentleness!”

“Really?” An Long smirked. His fingers crept toward the soles of Song Qingshi’s feet. “Let me see.”

Song Qingshi was very ticklish. He tucked his knees to his chest. “Quit it! You’re not allowed to give me any more massages!”

“See, now your left leg has more strength. A real massage needs a little pressure. Don’t be afraid of the pain. I fight so much, I’ve got tons of experience with these injuries. I know what I’m talking about.”

Song Qingshi thought that sounded like an excuse to tickle him and jumped away. “I’m a doctor! I know what I’m talking about too!”

Yue Wuhuan arrived on the scene with freshly brewed medicine. He took a deep breath and set it down. “Now now, An-dage. Zunzhu’s injuries aren’t fully healed, so he needs peace and quiet to rest. We’re not in a rush. It’s fine if he takes his time to recover. Please don’t mess with him.”

Song Qingshi nodded furiously. His little angel understood boundaries.

Yue Wuhuan lifted Song Qingshi’s arm and tenderly applied ointment to the bruises. He then massaged Song Qingshi with great gentleness, like he was afraid of hurting him.

“He’s holding himself back.” An Long sneered at Yue Wuhuan’s innocent act. He had expected Yue Wuhuan, presented with the defenseless Song Qingshi, to devour him completely, but they were both still very pure. Clearly, the mad demon had patience and caution to spare. An Long admired Yue Wuhuan’s restraint, at least enough to refrain from killing him for now.

He would continue observing the situation before he made a move.

Song Qingshi still lay on the floor making the best notes he could. He easily wrote ten thousand more words: every detail of every spot they would see and a meticulous itinerary with prepared fail-safes for any and all circumstances. He believed that nothing was impossible as long as you were willing to learn. He’d even secretly practiced his cool lines in front of the cadavers in the dissection lab, so he wouldn’t stammer delivering them later.

His extensive study touched both troublemakers. They exchanged a glance and silently agreed to set aside their differences for the trip’s duration; they could pretend to be friends for the sake of Song Qingshi’s efforts.

After a dozen or so days, Song Qingshi’s left side regained full mobility. He’d flushed the poison out of An Long’s body and cared for Yue Wuhuan’s injuries as well. He broke Qingluan’s life seal, left her a way to contact him in an emergency, then entrusted the valley’s administration to her. Finally he packed, asked Yue Wuhuan for a large allowance, and absconded with the other two in tow.

Normally, when he left for business or errands, he would ride a spirit beast. They were swift, but they were unsuited for appreciating the scenery along the way. Besides, they were rare, and only large sects or powerful cultivators rode them. A trio of beasts would draw too much attention and spoil a quiet trip.

Song Qingshi solicited the other two for opinions and decided to make the trip on horseback. Ordinary cultivators usually chose to travel the immortal realm by horse. It kept a low profile.

“This is the Double Dragon Rock.” Song Qingshi glanced at the cheat sheet in his sleeve. After confirming the location, he did his best to recite the explanation. “Yunying-zhenren wrote about it in her *Myths of Nanyang Mountain*. Two dragons fought, causing a monumental rainstorm that flooded the land. The Heavenly Emperor sent a god to slaughter the dragons, and they became this rock. Make sure to look at it and take it in…”

“I see it, Zunzhu,” Yue Wuhuan said without hesitation. “This rock was clearly created by the heavens and the earth. It possesses both form and spirit. How extraordinary.”

Hearing this shameless response, An Long swallowed *I think it looks like a big ugly toad.* After fermenting for a while, he finally choked out, “It totally looks like huge dragons, yeah…”

Song Qingshi, satisfied by their praise, turned his attention to the rock again. Why did it look like a toad no matter how he squinted? Perhaps something had gone wrong with his eyes. His companions expounded on the mightiness of the dragons, so he sang some praise for the rock too in case they thought he couldn’t appreciate art.

“And what did we learn from this story?” Song Qingshi concluded.

An Long’s face froze. “Huh?”

“The importance of brotherhood and not fighting?” Yue Wuhuan ventured after mulling it over.

His answer pleased Song Qingshi. His little angel understood him best, after all.

An Long turned his despairing gaze on the sky. He suddenly remembered one of the worlds an illusion bug had created for him. In it, he improved on the bug, revamping the rules of the dreams it could create, until he managed to tweak Song Qingshi’s personality. With that, An Long lured Song Qingshi into his arms—only for the counterfeit to drive him to distraction by asking him weird social ethics and reproductive health questions in bed.

His life was so hard.

He hated Yue Wuhuan but respected his patience. He couldn't close his eyes and spout bullshit at the drop of a hat.

"An Long, what're you zoning out for?" Seeing that An Long wasn't paying attention to his lecture, Song Qingshi called on him. He was about to introduce the next area, when he saw the scenery before him. He froze. "Huh? It wasn't like this before. Why did it change?"

Yue Wuhuan followed his gaze toward a majestic temple with carved beams and painted walls atop the mountain. It was a beautiful place, and there was clearly no lack of incense being lit inside. Lively crowds traveled up and down the road, while merchants thronged the entrance hawking candles, incense, and food.

"Is something wrong with this temple?" Yue Wuhuan asked.

"This place was totally dilapidated," Song Qingshi said, lost. "Nobody would come here."

"When was your last visit, Zunzhu?"

Song Qingshi thought about it. "I lived here when I established my foundation. Maybe eight hundred years ago?"

"Things must have changed since then. It's been so long." Yue Wuhuan smiled. Song Qingshi preferred seclusion and knew little of the outside world. "Why did you stay in an old temple, by the way?"

Song Qingshi had let too much slip. The immortal realm had plenty of affordable accommodation. Even foundation-level cultivators could find a place to stay for the night without resorting to such circumstances.

"I came across an ill child, and I couldn't go into town at the time," he said, embarrassed. "I needed to go somewhere we wouldn't be disturbed."

"But…why?"

"The child was an abandoned half-demon."

Yue Wuhuan understood at once. Lowly mortals commanded little respect from the immortal realm, but the hated demons had none. The creatures were born from the

malice within the earth. Most had grotesque appearances and understood nothing but greed, desire, and violence. They triggered bloody battles wherever they went.

Occasionally, a demon would forcefully take a woman and bring a half-demon into the world. Half-demons always had some of the physical characteristics of demons. After they grew up, most succumbed to their nature and became irredeemable monsters. Thus, in the immortal realm, half-demons were forbidden. Everyone hated them.

"And you didn't think it would bite the hand that feeds it?" An Long scoffed. "You love to meddle."

"It was a complicated case! He suffered from the combined effects of three different poisons. His body was rotting from the inside out."

He'd known it wasn't wise to save a half-demon, but he couldn't help taking the child in when he saw the way he struggled in the mud despite being so close to death. He was so desperate to live. Song Qingshi didn't dare let anyone see, so he hid in the run-down temple for two whole years while he cured the child.

He'd wanted to send the child to Wanfa Temple's Cibei-xianzun. Cibei-xianzun, a half-demon himself, tempered his dark tendencies with boundless compassion. He used the respect and influence afforded him to care for half-demon children without reservation. Under his guidance, most of the children maintained their humanity and refrained from evil.

But the child ran away soon after.

He stumbled through the story, but Yue Wuhuan listened intently. Cibei-xianzun and most of his disciples had died respectable, lamentable deaths trying to save the world in the Battle Against Demons three hundred years ago. Even beasts like Jin Feiren dared not disrespect Cibei-xianzun's memory.

"Good thing that child didn't go. It would've been too dangerous." Song Qingshi sighed. He hadn't participated in the battle, but many of his patients did. He had seen the damage firsthand.

An Long snorted. "That kind of dirty thing wasn't worth your concern."

“That was my first critically ill patient. I did everything I could for him.” Song Qingshi didn’t like to dwell on this memory. “But I didn’t know how to talk to him. I was cold. I could never say exactly what I meant. He probably hated me, and that’s why he left without saying goodbye.”

“Perhaps it was just his malevolent instincts,” Yue Wuhuan said.

An Long educated him: “That’s why they say you can’t change a demon’s nature.”

“He wasn’t that bad! It was my fault,” Song Qingshi said. “I forget everything that isn’t research when I make elixirs. Even eating. I didn’t always provide meals, so he often had to catch birds to feed himself. Then he ate this red snake fruit I kept hidden—”

“The red snake that only bears fruit once every three hundred years? The one that’s very beautiful, and very, very poisonous?” Yue Wuhuan asked.

“That one.” Song Qingshi put his head in his hands, unwilling to look back on the past. “It was an emergency, and I got scared, so I used a rather violent treatment method. He was in a terrible state afterward. I was too afraid to keep him around for much longer. What if he died in my care?”

The more Song Qingshi spoke, the more he drooped; his patient had suffered from his inexperience. Unfortunately, his communication issues had been serious at the time. He couldn’t even express his distress back then.

An Long, though, felt no compassion. He cackled. “I remember when I first met you. You sounded even more like a fool than you do now!”

“That’s enough out of you!” Song Qingshi was so angry he moved to burn him.

“Sorry, sorry!” An Long cried. “You speak *great* now. You don’t even stammer when you recite stuff you memorized.”

Yue Wuhuan didn’t say anything because he was deep in thought. He felt like he’d discovered something important.

Chapter 43

HAOLONG NOTICED a spiritual mouse in the bushes and shot down from where it had been wrapped around Song Qingshi's waist. Unfortunately for the snake, spiritual mice in the depths of the forest were quick to run from danger. Haolong had endured the prohibition on eating mice in the Medicine King's Valley for too long. Now that it could do as it pleased, it wouldn't return until it had its fill, so An Long rushed off to assist his beloved pet in its pursuit.

Song Qingshi led Yue Wuhuan into the temple, but he regretted it the moment they entered.

The temple was full of agitated cultivators mid-dispute. It seemed like they were discussing something important. Most were from famous Buddhist sects like Five Mountain, but a handful of rogue and demonic cultivators were in attendance as well. There were even a few cultivators clad as disciples from Golden Phoenix Mountain.

Song Qingshi had no love to spare for Golden Phoenix Mountain, but he didn't think he should avoid them. He wasn't scared of a bunch of low-down, dirty animals, but Yue Wuhuan might be uncomfortable.

In his hesitation, he glanced at Yue Wuhuan, indicating that he left the decision to stay or go with him. Yue Wuhuan's calm gaze rested on the group of people for a moment.

"Zunzhu, something interesting seems to have happened."

That meant Song Qingshi's little angel wanted to stay and watch things unfold.

The Medicine King rarely left his valley. Few had seen the man behind his fierce reputation, and Yue Wuhuan, meanwhile, was wearing his mask. His figure, his bearing, and the lower half of his face were beautiful but not *that* eye-catching. His getup wasn't unusual, as many cultivators had reason to disguise their appearance.

The cultivators from Golden Phoenix Mountain were young and inexperienced, likely new disciples, and Yue Wuhuan's expression said his grudge didn't extend to

them. Song Qingshi didn't recognize any of the other cultivators as powerful sect elders he'd met previously, so he didn't pay much attention to them. He and Yue Wuhuan approached the group like random rogue cultivators after taking stock of those present.

A demonic water spirit beast that had appeared nearby and a lost relic of Mo Yuan's made up the bulk of conversation.

The beast would have many water-elemental spiritual beads within its body. There were numerous uses for those beads, and they could be made into aqua powder, which was very nourishing for water elementals. Song Qingshi had yet to fully recover from the damage to his yuanying, so he had a great need for water-elemental medicines.

The spiritual beads *were* tempting, but so was Mo Yuan's mysterious relic. After all, the sword master was Yue Wuhuan's idol.

Not many people knew how Mo Yuan had died; they just knew he hadn't left much behind. Maybe he'd hidden a sword technique, a precious blade, or a secret journal. If not those, perhaps there were traces from when he was alive that could teach them more about his glorious life and how a mortal had reached the top through swordplay.

Yue Wuhuan seemed very absorbed, as if he were thinking the same thing.

Suddenly, the cultivators let out shocked cries and drew their weapons. Song Qingshi looked for the source of the alarm, only to find a satisfied Haolong slithering through the crowd. It promptly wrapped itself around his waist and nuzzled its head into his neck. He didn't know what to do with this needy, whiny snake!

"Xiaobai, behave. We're in public."

The warning came too late. Everyone's eyes were already on him.

Song Qingshi's social anxiety hit him at full force, and he tensed at the impact. His expression grew colder and colder as he withdrew into the solitary demeanor of the Medicine King. His aura could ward people off for miles around.

The Xilin Poison King's reputation for brutality ensured he was well known, and his fierce beast Haolong was just as famous. Seeing it looped affectionately around

Song Qingshi's waist, the shocked cultivators started to analyze the situation.

An Long was one of the strongest yuanying cultivators in the immortal realm. Rumor had it he'd once bested a fenshen-level cultivator and lived to tell the tale. No one who'd witnessed An Long's insect army devouring its victims dared to challenge him when he was in a bad mood.

The whole world knew about An Long's terrible temper, but his crazed devotion to the Medicine King was even more infamous. If there was a medicine in a secret realm that the Medicine King could use, An Long would get it. If he saw a treasure suitable for the Medicine King, he'd kill for it. But for some reason, "The Medicine King Song Qingshi" was a forbidden topic when An Long was around. If anyone said a word about him *liking* Song Qingshi, they were dead. Anyone bad-mouthing Song Qingshi would die too.

An Long strolled into the temple after Haolong, his eyes glinting dangerously as he studied the mishmash of people inside. He seemed disgusted by the sheer amount of trash in his field of view. The crowd held its breath and parted to either side of the room, leaving a stiff Song Qingshi in the middle. He was holding Haolong but hadn't managed to react otherwise.

Yue Wuhuan furrowed his brows and approached in an attempt to divert some of the gazes piercing through Song Qingshi.

An Long, however, was used to stares. He loped up to Song Qingshi, his fierce expression morphing into a carefree grin. "Hey, Qingshi, what're you up to?" He played his finger under Haolong's chin.

"Quit fooling around," Song Qingshi snapped quietly.

An Long loved a good scolding, so he leaned over Song Qingshi with a big smile. "Aw, I didn't do anything on purpose."

Everyone knew who they were at this point: three of the most unreasonable villains in the immortal realm.

Legend had it that poison flowed through the eccentric Medicine King's veins. At any moment, he might drag away those he didn't like and use them to test his medicine. And the masked beauty at his side was the lunatic Wuhuan. His looks were ruined, his emotions unpredictable, and his methods cruel. Then there was the savage Xilin Poison King…

The most powerful cultivator present was only at the peak of the golden-core stage. They would not dare anger this dangerous trio. Those who had spoken freely just seconds ago now shrank into themselves like turtles. The prettier ones feared Song Qingshi most of all—he'd even ruined the face of a beauty like Wuhuan-gongzi and driven him to madness. A yuanying master who destroyed beautiful flowers like that couldn't be considered human!

Song Qingshi's anxiety spiked under the stares from the crowd. His face twisted unnaturally. To the others, he looked ready to kill, but An Long knew Song Qingshi well and couldn't help but laugh to himself.

"Qingshi, you're so scary," An Long whispered in his ear.

The resulting fireball to the forehead had An Long yelping for reprieve.

He didn't care that groveling was embarrassing. In Xilin, fearing your wife or partner was just the way things were. A good smack was a sign of affection, so he loved the negative attention. Besides, he could announce his closeness to Song Qingshi as well as distract him from his nerves with this little dance.

Yue Wuhuan had seen through An Long's act a while ago and found his posturing laughably immature. Ever since walking in, Yue Wuhuan's attention was split between Song Qingshi and a familiar face in the corner.

The majestic Wu Jing was a rogue cultivator from overseas who clearly stood above everyone else. Some "interesting" events from their shared past rose in Yue Wuhuan's memory as disgust rolled in his stomach.

He wanted to indulge in something that he hadn't in a while. Since Song Qingshi's focus was elsewhere, Yue Wuhuan lifted the corners of his red lips and smiled at Wu

Jing. His sparkling phoenix eyes and elegance were mesmerizing.

Then Yue Wuhuan composed himself, stopped smiling, and looked away. He stood next to Song Qingshi so demurely that no one could criticize him. The contrast between his immaculate conduct and devastating beauty made the heart ache. His purity was obviously just pretense.

Song Qingshi had relaxed enough to speak after burning An Long. "Start from the beginning," he ordered the crowd.

His thoughts raced when he was nervous, and he tended to compensate with blunt, obtuse commands. An Long knew this and elaborated, "You in the corner, the idiot wearing yellow! And you, cow nose with a cockscomb on his head. Yes, I'm talking to you. Weren't you chatty just a second ago? Finish your story! Make Qingshi happy, or I'll find other volunteers."

Which meant An Long would kill them, *then* enlist someone else. The two cultivators didn't dare disobey. They rushed forward to explain.

A demonic water beast with an appetite for fishermen had appeared in the Moon Banquet River nearby. No one dared to go into the river anymore, so the remaining fishermen had appealed to a local sect for help: the Red Dragon Sect.

Despite its mighty name, the Red Dragon Sect was a poor sect that studied talismans and produced them for the major sects. Their leader was only at the golden-core level, but he had a sterling reputation and rarely involved himself in conflict.

The beast wasn't so strong the Red Dragon master and a handful of disciples couldn't dispatch it—but they hadn't returned. When other sects dropped by Red Dragon to pick up their order of talismans, a panicked young disciple informed them the leader had been missing for three days.

So the sects sent strong cultivators to investigate beneath the surface of Moon Banquet River.

Pursued by cultivators, the water beast retreated to an underwater cave. Once the cultivators were inside, they realized the cave hid a shocking secret. The walls near the

entrance were gouged with sword marks, grim traces of a battle to the death. They seemed to have been left behind by Mo Yuan himself.

It was pitch-black further inside the cave, and anything could be hidden there. They didn't dare continue, fearing traps ahead. A perfunctory search of the cave mouth turned up a lucky Red Dragon Sect disciple who had survived, though he was unconscious—and his hair had gone white with shock.

The cultivators discussed potential rescue efforts for a long time. Some wanted to ask a yuanying master for help, some favored braving the cave together, and others called for dividing into groups and making multiple forays. In the end, a few bold cultivators tempted by potential relics entered the cave as a small investigative team.

They had also disappeared.

"Save them first!" cried a disciple of the Five Mountain Sect. "My shixiong's inside. If this drags on any longer, he might die!"

"Is your shixiong's life worth more than everyone else's?" hissed a cultivator from the School of Melody.

The crowd once again broke out in debate.

"Let me see that unconscious disciple," Song Qingshi said, but no one heard him over the ongoing argument.

An Long couldn't watch any longer. With a wave of his hand, a throng of bugs scurried over the floor. Cultivators leaped out of their path as they bore down on the youngest member of the Red Dragon Sect. An Long bade him to lead the way.

"He was found in rough shape." The boy had just begun to cultivate, and his inexperience made him fearless. He wasn't cowed by these villains. Hoping that his martial brother could be saved, he took them to the chambers near the back gardens.

"When my shixiong was first rescued, he looked pretty bad, and they couldn't really move him. Master Zhihui set him here. After he recovers, they'll send him back."

Song Qingshi followed him inside and extended his spiritual senses. The patient on the bed had white hair, but besides some bumps and scrapes, he hadn't incurred any

injuries that would cause him to lose consciousness. Song Qingshi applied needles to the patient's head and guided his power through them to stimulate his pressure points. He glanced over his shoulder for Yue Wuhuan, but he was absent. Instead, he ordered An Long to dissolve some heart-calming pills in water, which An Long did without question.

Using a gooseneck kettle, he tipped the mixture into the boy's mouth.

With the help of the needles, the patient's eyes flew open. "Snakes! So many snakes!"

Haolong heard someone calling for a snake, so it peeked at the disciple over the edge of the bed. When the patient saw a giant snake so close, his eyes rolled into the back of his head, foam dribbled from his mouth, and he passed out again.

The Red Dragon disciples' cries of joy turned to despair.

"It's all right," Song Qingshi said a little awkwardly. He hoisted Haolong off the bed and went through several drafts in his head before he continued. "The patient was absolutely terrified, which caused his senses to go haywire, locking him in that unconscious state. I've restored his awareness. He'll wake up again soon… I'll leave some heart-calming pills and soothing incense for you. After a few days of recovery, he'll be fine. Also, the patient might have a residual fear of snakes. Try to avoid this stressor in your daily lives so it doesn't trigger him."

If the immortal realm's number one doctor said it, it must have been true! The Red Dragon disciples' cries of despair returned to joy. Then they remembered their teacher might not number among the living and started weeping again.

"The cave's full of snakes?" An Long's heart hammered with excitement. The Thousand Poison Sect members were masters at handling snakes. A den of underwater snakes must have some unique characteristics. He wanted to capture a few specimens to tame, so he pulled Song Qingshi to the side to negotiate. "Can you come with me? You can have the water beast, and I'll take the snakes. If there are relics from Mo Yuan, we'll split 'em."

That worked for Song Qingshi. “We shouldn’t go in the water after dark. Let’s make some preparations and go tomorrow.”

The demonic water beast might not have been powerful, but its body was nearly transparent. At night, it’d be harder to find a deadlier quarry.

Tears poured down the disciples’ faces as they prostrated themselves in supplication. An Long and Song Qingshi would earn their infinite gratitude for their teacher’s rescue. An Long didn’t care; he skipped off to prepare a vessel for the snakes. Song Qingshi confirmed the patient’s stable condition, then went to find Yue Wuhuan to tell him the news. If he accompanied them on their descent, they could have an adventure just like the *Three Tiger-Fighting Brothers*! Surely that would improve their relationship.

He wondered why Yue Wuhuan wasn’t by his side. When he extended his senses, he perceived him in a quiet corner, speaking to someone. Song Qingshi hurried over, but before he reached Yue Wuhuan, he froze.

Yue Wuhuan was in a fine mood, lounging against the trunk of a tree with his arms crossed. He fiddled with a fallen leaf as he listened to a tall, ruddy-cheeked cultivator stumble through a confession.

“It’s, uh, great that you’re available. I-I don’t mind about your face. I’ll treat you well…” the man said.

Chapter 44

SONG QINGSHI THOUGHT it was bad form to eavesdrop, but it was too late to walk away.

"Zunzhu." Yue Wuhuan flicked the leaf away and nodded at his admirer, signaling for him to leave. The man didn't dare provoke the Medicine King, so he bowed and hastened away. However, he glanced back longingly quite a few times as he went.

No matter how dense Song Qingshi might be, he could tell something was wrong. He dithered for a while, but he couldn't hold his question back: "Wuhuan, was that your friend?"

"We're familiar." Yue Wuhuan reached out and smoothed Song Qingshi's flyaway hair. "He once helped me when I was injured. I'll never forget it. It was serendipity to run into him here. He wanted to catch up, so we had a nice chat."

"He helped you? Then…" Song Qingshi understood. "He's a good man. You should let him know you're grateful."

Yue Wuhuan finished adjusting Song Qingshi's hair and looked into his clear, bright eyes.

"Mm. I will."

Yue Wuhuan chuckled. How many good people were there in the world? He hadn't seen a single one seeking pleasure on Golden Phoenix Mountain.

Wu Jing had a funny sort of chivalry. He liked to help troubled beauties who weren't accustomed to such favor. He spoke with a shy honesty and showed them little kindnesses, then offered them sweet words and empty promises. Once they lost their novelty, he cast them off at the first opportunity and relished their grief.

One foolish servant girl had taken her own life after he threw her aside. Wu Jing shed a few fake tears, wrote a few poems to mourn her, then returned to his crusade.

At the time, Yue Wuhuan never asked for mercy in bed. He yearned for annihilation, so he accepted violent suitors without complaint. He even provoked them. Of Golden Phoenix Mountain's slaves, he suffered the most. He'd been bedbound after enduring yet another brutal punishment when Wu Jing first made his acquaintance.

So beautiful, so delicate, so helpless. The perfect prey.

Wu Jing fell for Yue Wuhuan and pursued him aggressively, certain he would eventually become his. He regaled Yue Wuhuan with the occasional interesting story and showered him with medicine and accessories. By all appearances, he was attentive, gentle, and kind. Unfortunately, he wasn't very patient. As soon as Yue Wuhuan's injuries improved, he started cajoling Yue Wuhuan for sex.

How could Yue Wuhuan miss Wu Jing's crude intentions? Not that knowing had done him any good. His position required that he act the fool. At least Wu Jing had offered him a little information about the outside world.

To Yue Wuhuan's surprise, it turned out he had played the part too well. Wu Jing clung to the memory, thinking it had all been real. Now that Yue Wuhuan had lost his beauty, Wu Jing longed for another opportunity to play with the poor, fragile victim.

Disgusting. Utterly disgusting. The world was so choked with filth he struggled to breathe, unless he stayed close to Song Qingshi. The soft fragrance of his hair soothed Yue Wuhuan. He took refuge in the only person who had ever treated him gently and asked for nothing in return.

The nearby town was too small for an inn, so the Red Dragon Sect arranged accommodations for them. Although they cleaned up one of the best houses in town, it was still just a farmer's modest home. Yue Wuhuan found it dirty enough to clean Song Qingshi's room again. Before leaving, he laid out the bedding they'd brought, then said he wanted to clean his own room and go into town to find some ingredients.

Song Qingshi offered to help several times but was rebuffed. He tucked himself obediently into a corner instead and occupied himself with a book.

But for once, he couldn't absorb what he was reading. His heart was restless. This was a text he liked, but he stared at the same page for ages, unseeing. Yue Wuhuan and that unknown man kept flashing before his eyes. Unfamiliar thoughts bubbled in his head at a slow boil.

I was unconscious for ten years. I missed so many things…

Yue Wuhuan had probably made friends on his adventures, right?

His little angel was clever, kind, capable, and witty. Who could resist?

The system had ordered him to help the main character *achieve happiness*. Did that mean Yue Wuhuan had to fall in love with someone and start a new life? That man seemed like a good option: tall, handsome, and heroic. He must have good character if he was willing to ignore Yue Wuhuan's "ruined" looks. If their feelings developed and they wanted to leave together, what should Song Qingshi do?

The Medicine King's Valley had never held a wedding. Should he prepare a dowry for Yue Wuhuan? No, no. Yue Wuhuan was a man. He should prepare the betrothal gift. But that didn't seem quite right either…

Song Qingshi didn't understand matters of the heart, nor did he have anyone to discuss them with. Either way, he had to wish them well and watch his mouth. He'd prepare a speech beforehand. It was vital that he remain calm, whatever happened. He couldn't embarrass Yue Wuhuan.

The more Song Qingshi thought about it, the more disorganized his thoughts became. He decided to take a walk outside to clear his mind.

The brisk wind at dusk helped.

I'm being foolish, aren't I? I should find something to do.

Moments later, he ran into a few kids playing a game by the roadside. They were trying to push a huge rock into a ditch, but the rock wouldn't budge no matter how they strained. They bandied insults back and forth—you're too weak, and *you're* too useless—until it became a full shouting match.

Song Qingshi watched them scrabble for some time before he intervened. “You guys should try using a lever.”

The kids stared at this pretty cultivator. He knelt on the ground and scratched a formula in the dirt with a branch.

“Okay. Since you want to move a heavy object, you need a force multiplier. First, you find out the weight of the rock, then—”

The children’s eyes darted from the cultivator in their midst to the formula and back again. Then they made a break for it together.

“Is that guy dumb?”

“He’s nuts!”

“I think he might be the new teacher.”

“No! That’s too scary!”

Song Qingshi squatted on the ground, frozen. He rose to his feet, threw away the branch, and smiled lopsidedly at his equation in the dirt. Sometimes his attempts at communication angered people. Sometimes it embarrassed them. More often they ignored him.

He didn’t know what he’d done wrong other than impose himself.

Song Qingshi sat quietly on the patch of grass under a nearby tree and listened to cricket song. Under the glow of the moon, the clouds took the shape of a dragon, a bird, a mouse, a cat… Their procession never bored him.

He’d grown accustomed to solitude, so he never felt lacking.

When patients recovered, they left the hospital. Like dragons returning to sea, or a phoenix taking to the sky.

It was fine if he remained, unmoving…

Yue Wuhuan worried, after he finished making dinner and didn’t see Song Qingshi. After a thorough search, he found Song Qingshi sitting under a tree, lost in

thought—of unfinished experiments, probably. He sighed and allowed himself a chuckle. He'd thought of a prank. Using a spell to make himself lighter, he jumped into the canopy and observed Song Qingshi. He didn't notice.

Suddenly, Yue Wuhuan violently shook the tree boughs. Leaves fell like rain, burying the man beneath.

Song Qingshi sat up in shock. He readied himself to strike back with his fire, when he heard the familiar peal of laughter above him.

"Wuhuan?" he called out, a little embarrassed.

Yue Wuhuan landed at his side. "Aren't you afraid of an ambush, Zunzhu?"

"You didn't mean any harm," Song Qingshi explained. "When my underworld flames detect ill intent, they release on their own. Don't worry."

Yue Wuhuan started, then turned serious. "Don't just tell that to anyone. They could use it against you."

"You're the only one who knows," Song Qingshi assured him. "I'm not stupid. I won't tell anyone how to breach my defenses. Even if someone figures it out in a fight, once the fire's unleashed, they won't live to tell the tale."

"Then why tell me?" Yue Wuhuan asked, exasperated.

"You're not just anyone." *You're my little angel.*

At that, Yue Wuhuan's worries subsided. "Zunzhu, what are you doing out here, anyway?"

"Looking at the clouds."

"Clouds?"

"Yeah."

"I'll join you."

"Huh? Do you like doing this too? Most people find it boring." Song Qingshi brushed off the leaves, sounding surprised. "There's nothing interesting up there. I'm

just watching the clouds change shapes. You don't need to keep me company. Do what you want."

Yue Wuhuan took a seat, the smile deepening in his eyes. "No matter what, if we're together, it won't be boring."

Song Qingshi stared numbly. His ears were a little warm, and his eyes watered.

Good thing the darkness veiled his brief moment of vulnerability.

Yue Wuhuan fell silent where he sat. Just existing with someone seemed so mundane, but Song Qingshi was comfortable. It reminded him of their time in the study. Even reading seemed more interesting when they were together.

What was this feeling? Were there theories and explanations that could be found in books?

Song Qingshi mulled it over but came up blank. He had never experienced this before. He couldn't describe it, but he enjoyed it.

Could he hold on to the feeling if he worked hard to treat Yue Wuhuan better?

Am I being too selfish?

Song Qingshi snuck a glance at Yue Wuhuan. He seemed to be in a good mood.

He gathered the courage to ask a question he didn't know quite how to phrase. "That guy from earlier is, um, a good friend of yours, right? You two…"

Yue Wuhuan turned his head and chuckled. "Oh, Zunzhu, you must be kidding. We've just met before. That's all."

"He s-saved you, though," Song Qingshi stammered. "Sh-should we give him something as thanks?"

"Zunzhu, don't worry. There's a gift on its way already." Yue Wuhuan's smile grew brighter and brighter, a mysterious glint in his eyes. "I don't know if Hero Wu will like it, but he's too polite to embarrass me by refusing a gift."

"If he doesn't like it, should I find something else?"

“No.” Yue Wuhuan paused, seemingly lost in thought. After a while, he smiled again. He took a few deep, jerky breaths, like he was struggling to conceal his excitement, and used the lock bug to steady his emotions. Then he laid his head on Song Qingshi’s shoulder, nuzzling it. He spoke softly. “He’s going overseas soon. If he crosses paths with you again, you can give him another gift if you’d like.”

“Oh, all right,” Song Qingshi said contentedly.

Greed and desire crept into Yue Wuhuan’s beautiful phoenix eyes, shadowed by the mask, as he looked at Song Qingshi.

He’d laid the trap long ago. Finally, he could savor the delicious catch.

In a faraway house, Wu Jing made his way into a quiet room.

He could see hints of a tempting figure through the dark, heavy canopy over the bed. He snuck forward, then fumbled for the beauty under the cotton blankets, eager to relive their romantic dreams.

All he found was a stiff, icy hand.

The prey immediately detected a trap. He didn’t hesitate before snapping his waiting conquest’s neck.

Somehow, it lolled toward him and let out a sickening laugh. “Hee, hee…”

This was not a living human but a corpse turned poison puppet, its ghoulish face pockmarked with needle marks like a doll crafted in hell.

He tried to run, but after a few steps, he couldn’t move anymore. He shouted for help, but no sound came from his paralyzed throat.

Like a spider, the puppet crawled closer, its twisted limbs twining around him in a poisonous embrace. Countless bloodking vines girdled him, thrust into his mouth and punched through skin. They writhed inside him. His bones shattered; his viscera tore. The vines suckled blood, consumed flesh, and left rot in their wake.

The moth twitched in the spider's web and watched, eyes wide, as his death drew near.

He had always been the hunted, never the hunter.

There was no chance of escape. Only despair.

Hell was where he belonged.

Yue Wuhuan sat with Song Qingshi until the bloodking vines had sated themselves, hidden the poison puppet, and cleaned all traces from the crime scene. He willed his spiritual senses to destroy the vines that had touched the disgusting thing. The vines would soon grow new shoots.

After his work was done, Yue Wuhuan got up. "Zunzhu, it's getting late. I made you some sweet osmanthus soup. It's probably cold by now."

Song Qingshi jumped up. "Why didn't you say so earlier?"

"Sorry, I forgot. I had something important on my mind."

"So you get lost in thought too?"

"Sometimes…"

"Do you feel uncomfortable?"

"No, no."

The two walked off, laughing and chattering all the way.

Under the eaves, the hungry spider spun his patient web, waiting for the white butterfly to alight. That would be the real feast.

Chapter 45

THE NEXT DAY, the three of them arrived at the river, ready to look for the monster.

An Long whistled. Bugs and venomous snakes swarmed the riverbank, forming a defensive array that brashly declared it Thousand Poison territory. Whatever happened here, other sects were not allowed to cause trouble or steal the credit. The array also barred nearby villagers from stumbling in and injuring themselves. A few disciples from the Red Dragon Sect stood guard with a ready explanation for passersby. They clutched at each other and quaked in fear when they saw An Long's infestation, but they held steadfast.

"Water-repellent orbs, fish-skin diving suits, emergency medicine, luminous pearls, thunderfire pills… I'll pack a few strands of airgrass, just in case." Song Qingshi moved down the list of equipment. "I didn't forget anything, did I?"

The waters of many secret realms hid abundant treasure, so every cultivator carried basic diving gear—no need to purchase anything extra.

"You didn't," Yue Wuhuan said. Because his cultivation was the lowest, he would bait the water beast with his bloodking vines, luring it out to where Song Qingshi and An Long would ambush it.

"Don't worry. It'll be easy," Song Qingshi reassured Yue Wuhuan. "I'll be right there. I won't let you get hurt."

An Long, who'd just finished his array, snorted when he heard this. "Please *don't* release your flames of the underworld underwater. You'll kill way more than the water beast if you do. I haven't forgotten what happened back then."

At the time, the two had been exploring a secret realm. They encountered a school of man-eating demonic fish. When Song Qingshi summoned his poisonous flames to attack them, he forgot that the toxins would spread in the water, harming enemies and

allies alike. The fish suffered huge losses, and An Long's injuries confined him to the Medicine King's Valley for three months.

"I didn't have any experience at the time. I wouldn't do that again!" Song Qingshi said, his face red. Great. Now Yue Wuhuan knew the most embarrassing thing that had ever happened to him since he started cultivating. That damn dog!

Yue Wuhuan held his laughter. "Of course you wouldn't, Zunzhu."

The three of them equipped diving suits and water-repellent orbs. It didn't take long to find the cave. Worn carvings covered the exterior, as though some long-dead cultivator had staked their claim on a refuge from the rest of the world. Someone had slashed through the rock with enough force their sword left a furrow several feet deep. Song Qingshi wasn't a swordsman, but he could recognize an extraordinary feat. Yue Wuhuan stared at it, awestruck.

Had the sword master Mo Yuan really left it behind? Their excitement grew.

Song Qingshi and An Long concealed themselves on either side of the cave mouth. Yue Wuhuan swam close and studied the entrance before extending a few vines into the darkness. They thumped the cave walls, searching inch by inch for their target.

The vines startled the beast out of its deep slumber. It poked its head out of its hiding place, looking for the little cultivator that had disturbed its sweet dreams. It flew into a rage when it saw Yue Wuhuan, a mere foundation-level cultivator. Tentacles shot toward him, so swift they left whirlpools in their wake.

Song Qingshi lit up when the beast revealed itself. No everyday monster, this one. It had dark green spiritual beads inside, which meant it had lived for at least ten thousand years! It was a priceless treasure. He could make top-quality aqua powder with those beads!

Yue Wuhuan smiled, firm in his resolve to topple this trophy for Song Qingshi. He anchored two vines to throttle the speed at which he was being pulled into the cave, and the rest swarmed after the tentacles. Vines pierced the beast's flesh and dug out a bead. The infuriated monster roared out of the cave after Yue Wuhuan, brandishing its many limbs.

An Long watched raptly, hoping that the water beast and Yue Wuhuan could both lose. Unfortunately, to stray from the plan would alert Song Qingshi. An Long left his hiding spot reluctantly, grabbed the beast, and tore at its flesh with his bare hands. Some of his aquatic bugs scuttled into the wounds, relishing the nutrient-rich feast.

The demon water beast reeled in pain and turned to strike An Long.

Song Qingshi swam in front of Yue Wuhuan, burning away the tentacles wrapped around him. He signalled for Yue Wuhuan to back up. Catching the creature was too dangerous—leave it to the yuanying-level cultivators.

But before Yue Wuhuan could respond, the beast sighted Song Qingshi.

It froze for a moment. Its eyes turned red, as if it was suddenly facing its sworn enemy. Ignorant of An Long's stinging insects or Yue Wuhuan plundering its wounds for elemental beads, it barreled at Song Qingshi like a charging bull.

Song Qingshi had only burned two tentacles, nothing else. Why was it chasing after him?

An Long mimed whistling, then mouthed, "Hey, Qingshi. Did you kill its parents or steal its wife?"

Song Qingshi read his lips and shook his head frantically before he struck the beast with his red lotus blaze.

They were lucky the demon water beast was acting so erratically. It was usually an ambush predator, setting traps and sneaking up on its prey instead of fighting face-to-face. Once it revealed itself, it was like a piece of meat on the butcher's block. Even if underwater battles were a little more troublesome, two yuanying-level cultivators could handle it together.

The horde of bugs burrowed into its flesh; the astonishing, water-repelling fire consumed its tentacles. But it still hounded Song Qingshi, eager to devour him in one bite.

Song Qingshi decided to just roll with it and let the beast swallow him.

Red lotus blaze erupted around him, wreathing him in flame. He burned through the beast's belly, collecting beads as he went. The water beast heaved and flailed its tentacles, sending waves in every direction. At the peak of its hatred, it turned into water and swirled around them, suspending An Long, Song Qingshi, and Yue Wuhuan in a churning maelstrom. Song Qingshi threw up a barrier to shield Yue Wuhuan just before it exploded its own spiritual core, thrusting them deep inside the cave.

Song Qingshi took stock of the surroundings.

The cave was dark and quiet, but for a distant, faint light. As they swam toward it, the scenery around them changed. It resembled the nearby Mount Moon. Rays of light peeked in from cracks in the rock, crisscrossing as they lit up this tiny world. There was a shore ahead, and everything was covered in moss, grass, and twisting vines. It was a sanctuary of otherworldly beauty.

Song Qingshi crawled ashore and shook the water off himself. "Good thing I was quick," he boasted. "I managed to grab ten spiritual beads."

Yue Wuhuan followed. "I got three."

"Let's go back later and see if there are any beads still intact. We could also snag some pieces of its body as ingredients."

An Long breached the surface abruptly, drenching Song Qingshi. He glanced around, then frowned. "Where are my snakes?"

"Let's go look for the missing people first?" Song Qingshi suggested. The area emanated a vague sense of danger, and the Red Dragon Sect leader and those cultivators were still missing.

"Zunzhu. Something's wrong." Yue Wuhuan's expression turned serious. One of his bloodking vines brushed aside some of the foliage on the wall, revealing several gashes and ancient text carved throughout the cave. "There's an ancient array here. We need to leave immediately."

The missing cultivators had probably fallen victim to this. It was difficult to escape a grand ancient array of such scale. But Yue Wuhuan kept that to himself, because the array had started to emit a faint light.

"It's too late," Song Qingshi said helplessly. "The beast meant to send us here."

An Long spread his arms and grinned. "Let's trash this thing. Should we bet on who gets out first? How about winner gets to kiss the loser?"

"No!" Song Qingshi tugged Yue Wuhuan, who had the weakest cultivation of the three, closer. He glared at An Long; it'd be too easy for someone like the Alaskan malamute to take advantage of his pretty little angel. Song Qingshi corrected his inappropriate thoughts. "No gambling."

Yue Wuhuan looked grave. Perhaps he'd never seen something like this before?

A number of ancient arrays existed: traps, tests, killing arrays, and those that revealed desires. Some masters created them as encouraging lessons for posterity. Others left riddles they themselves could not solve or prisons that held their victims until they either escaped or died.

"Don't be scared," Song Qingshi said. "It doesn't seem like a killing array. We're here. It'll be fine."

The glow surrounded them, filling them with a top-heavy, dizzying feeling…

Song Qingshi woke to find himself sitting on a carved rosewood bed. A mirror and vanity stood next to him; it looked like the room of an unwed girl. He rose from the bed and walked a few steps. Everything felt wrong—there was something on his head shaking in time with his movements. It was very uncomfortable.

He had a hunch and ran to the mirror, then nearly fainted when he looked into it.

Who was this delicate, painted beauty in the embroidered white ruqun,[6] her shoulders draped with white fox fur and strings of pearls? Jewels and jade ornamented her hair. Why did she look a lot like him?

Song Qingshi touched his face. The beauty in the mirror did the same.

This wasn't him…was it?

He was a man, and obviously *manly*. Why would the array dress him in a stupid getup like this?!

Song Qingshi had never felt so panicked before. He patted himself down, confirmed his masculinity, then looked around in fear. An Long could blunder in and see him in this comical state at any moment. He'd laugh for five hundred years! And Song Qingshi was even more afraid Yue Wuhuan would witness his embarrassment. He might as well dig a grave and lie in it. Or detonate his yuanying.

He changed in a hurry. First, he took off the white fox fur with its patterned lotus-and-carp lining, then he scrambled to remove the hair accessories. But he'd never studied how girls wore their hair, so several of the ornaments snagged his hair. Enduring the pain, he ripped them out, strands still clinging to them.

It felt like something remained on the back of his head. Why did girls have so many accessories? Why were they so *fussy*?

Song Qingshi finished removing the accessories after some exertion. He was about to wash his face when he heard urgent footsteps approach his room. Whether it was An Long or Yue Wuhuan, they were about to rush in. What was he supposed to do? He couldn't let them see him, no matter what!

"Hold on! Don't come in!" he cried.

The door flew open anyway.

Song Qingshi followed his instincts and dove under the bed.

Chapter 46

AN LONG WALKED IN. He looked at the hair ornaments strewn over the floor, the embroidered furs, then the only cover in the room: the carved bed. It was clear what'd happened here.

Song Qingshi hated his thin figure's girlishness. An Long smothered his laughter. Song Qingshi would murder him for the tiniest giggle. He held it for a long, long time before his breath leveled out.

"Qingshi? Where are you?"

A pitiful voice came from under the bed. "An Long, please leave for a bit."

An Long nearly toppled over from glee. He had to see what Song Qingshi looked like, but then he might be forever blacklisted. He didn't dare dismantle the bed. A reconnaissance bug could peek underneath, but he realized as he extended the hand to summon it that nothing would come.

"This array's suppressing my powers. I can't use my bugs."

"Huh?" Song Qingshi tried to call his spiritual fires. His flames of the underworld were completely gone; only the blaze of the red lotus remained.

Looking at the tiny burning lotus in his palm, he realized something. "Why are you trying to summon bugs? Were you going to spy on me?"

The malamute was always up to no good. The lotus in Song Qingshi's hand burned bigger and brighter with his fury.

An Long backed out of the room and barely managed to dodge several fireballs. He decided not to push his luck any further and ran off to fetch a bowl of water for Song Qingshi's face. Then he thrust his black outer robe through a crack in the door before squatting in a corner and sighing. The perfect opportunity, ruined.

Song Qingshi wiped the makeup off his face, took his hair down, and changed into the roomy men's robes. He sighed in relief before motioning for the malamute to

cease his self-reflection and enter the room.

An Long saw him and went still.

Song Qingshi was pretty, but over their long acquaintance he'd always swaddled himself with light, plain-colored robes. They gave him an austere, saintly aura, like sparkling white snow on mountain peaks. Now it was like black, an evil color, had tainted him. The ill-fitting robe hung on his frame and puddled where he sat on the edge of the carved bed. With his long, loose hair and barely concealed collarbones, he had the adorable, dazed appearance of having just participated in something debauched.

An Long had often dreamed of this.

Everything about Song Qingshi was exactly to his tastes. Seeing Song Qingshi like this scratched the scabbed-over wound that was An Long's desire—until it was open, ugly, *greedy*, and staring him right in the face.

He couldn't afford to make a mistake.

An Long closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"What's wrong?" Song Qingshi asked. An Long's gaze looked a little different. A little dangerous.

"Nothing. That robe looks weird on you. It's too big." An Long smirked and changed the subject. "Have you guessed the origins of this array yet?"

He knew Song Qingshi had made an extensive study of arrays and ancient texts few people had ever read.

"Well, yes." Song Qingshi hesitated for just a moment. "I've seen records of a similar array in *Anecdotes of Daoist Xunshan*. It was an ancient relic. Some of the pages were missing. Mount Moon had a strange array called the Heart-Devouring Nightmare that revealed hidden desires. It created an illusory world centered on one person's nightmare. Those lured inside had to find the nightmare's source and wake them up or stay trapped in the dream forever. But I'm not sure what 'waking up' entails."

He felt plenty awake, personally.

“What the hell?” An Long said. “Did Mo Yuan’s brain get flooded like the cave? He put all this effort into an array just to fuck with us?”

“Xunshan-zhenren came long before Mo Yuan. I don’t think this array has anything to do with him. Perhaps he visited this cave for some reason, then left those marks when he broke through the array,” Song Qingshi mused. “The disciple from the Red Dragon Sect mentioned snakes, but I didn’t see any bite marks. That doesn’t make sense. The array must’ve woven a nightmare about snakes, which caused his psychological trauma.”

“In that case, whose nightmare are we dealing with?”

“Probably mine,” Song Qingshi said, feeling sorry for himself.

He hated being told he looked like a girl, so the nightmare dressed him up like one. Yue Wuhuan wouldn’t worry about being girly, and it was even less likely to bother the malamute. He was having the time of his life, his smile so wide it should’ve flown off his face.

Song Qingshi’s embarrassment turned to anger. The red lotus blaze reappeared in his hand. He’d keep An Long’s lips firmly in place.

Sensing danger, An Long made a neat segue. “Where’s Wuhuan-xiaodi? What’s he up to in your nightmare?”

W-Wuhuan? But I’ll fail the system’s class…!

Song Qingshi regained his senses and his expression grew fearful. He jumped off the bed and rushed out the door—but the hem of his long black robe hindered his movement, and he tripped every other step. An Long had to stop him from flying away on his red lotus.

“That robe isn’t fireproof. If you burn it, I don’t have another one for you.”

Left with no other choice, Song Qingshi stumbled out of the room on foot.

People thronged the bustling street outside. He forgot their faces as soon as he saw them; they had regular features, but for some reason they blurred together like ghosts in a dream, unable to leave a single mark.

An Long whistled long and low. “This really is the Heart-Devouring Nightmare.”

Voracious little Qingshi loved reading niche, boring, useless books, and no one had such a vast hoard of knowledge.

“A-are there a-any bad neighborhoods around here?” Song Qingshi stammered, stopping one of the passersby.

The person was lost. “What do you consider ‘bad’?”

An Long stepped in with an explanation. “Somewhere with brothels or pleasure boats—places where men serve other men.”

Song Qingshi’s face paled. He and An Long were yuanying level, but right now neither of them could outperform a golden-core cultivator, and their most powerful abilities had been sealed away. Yue Wuhuan had just established his foundation; he had to be in a worse state. If the bloodking vines had been sealed too, he’d be indistinguishable from a regular mortal.

Their guide pointed east. “Go though this street, then turn the corner. Golden Phoenix Stage is the largest brothel in the city. The person you’re looking for will be there.”

That cursed name made Song Qingshi dizzy. He bolted down the street and turned the corner, where he saw a gorgeous tower about seven stories tall. A devastating beauty in a red-and-gold feather skirt stood at the very top. It was Yue Wuhuan. He had a white-knuckle grip on his jade xiao and stared at the sky with empty eyes, as though he couldn’t see or hear anything. His skirt fluttered in the wind, revealing flashes of scattered wounds and the shackles around his ankles.

Song Qingshi screamed his name.

Yue Wuhuan jumped off the tall building.

Song Qingshi no longer cared about ruining his clothes. He summoned the blaze of the red lotus and dove, swathed in fire, to catch Yue Wuhuan. But he was half a step behind.

The broken bird landed with a light thump. A red flower bloomed where it landed.

Life vanished that fast, that easily.

The ending had been too quick to process.

Song Qingshi stared wide-eyed at the aftermath. He couldn't breathe. He knelt in hot blood and gathered the motionless bird from its crimson pool.

In a daze, he tried to revive Yue Wuhuan over and over again, helplessly.

"I won't give up, I will not give up…"

It was the worst nightmare he'd ever experienced.

Wake up!

The world spun and turned dark.

A book in the Medicine King's Valley recorded one hundred twenty-seven different arrays taking advantage of one's innermost desires. Twelve of them killed anyone who failed the scenario, eighteen trapped the victim forever, and forty-six tortured them by looping back to the start until they succeeded. The rest of the arrays had unknown effects.

When Song Qingshi opened his eyes, he was sitting on that carved wooden bed in a silly girl's outfit again. His luck could have been worse. The array restarted if he failed the scenario, but repeating an endless nightmare would erode anyone's will past the point of no return.

He no longer dared to worry about his embarrassing appearance. He dashed outside, shoving aside An Long, who had wanted to ask what was happening. He bolted for Golden Phoenix Stage in a fervor. If he was a second late Yue Wuhuan would already be gone.

Faced with Song Qingshi's female attire, An Long let out a whistle. "How beautiful," he murmured. He told himself that he and Song Qingshi were a couple here

since they lived in the same mansion. And he was more than happy to see that hellion Yue Wuhuan suffer until death in this dream.

He could idle the rest of his days away in a beautiful place like this, but *unfortunately* it was Song Qingshi's nightmare. If he didn't help save the demon and solve the riddle, Song Qingshi would never stop hurting.

He'd watch the demon die ten thousand times, but let his little cutie suffer? An Long set out toward Golden Phoenix Stage to save Yue Wuhuan.

Song Qingshi flew on the red lotus and rushed into the building. A leering crowd surrounded Yue Wuhuan. Without a second thought, he raised his hand and a wall of fire burst upward, separating Yue Wuhuan from those pieces of trash.

"Wuhuan, are you okay?" he asked.

Yue Wuhuan sat on the floor trembling, his eyes filled with despair.

A black knife split the wall of flames. Those weren't weak cultivators; they were all at least golden-core level and armed with blades. They shot toward Song Qingshi. He wasn't adept with close-quarters combat. Now that his flames of the underworld were suppressed, he barely kept up, taking staggering injuries under their blows.

An Long entered the fray. At the sight of the blood staining Song Qingshi's white robes, he raged and twisted one of the cultivators' heads clean off. He was a fighter raised by many fierce battles and was well practiced in many methods. The loss of his bugs didn't weaken him that much. He held off their attacks with his fists alone, before he grabbed a dark knife from his attacker and swiped at the man's neck.

Song Qingshi's shoulders suddenly lightened. He spun around, looking for Yue Wuhuan, only to see he once again stood on the balcony.

Song Qingshi's courage fled out of him in an instant.

"D-don't jump," he said as he approached Yue Wuhuan. That was all he could think of. His stupid mouth never had the right words!

Song Qingshi was so desperate tears welled up in his eyes. He wanted to slap himself.

“I’m sorry, Zunzhu.” Yue Wuhuan’s face was full of despair. “This world is too dirty. I can’t take it any more…”

Then he backed up a step and dived off the balcony.

Song Qingshi had no time to think. He plummeted after him without hesitation and managed to grasp the hem of his feather skirt.

They fell together. An Long turned back just in time to see Song Qingshi drop off the balcony with no regard for his own life. He froze, and he forgot to raise the black blade he still held, even as his opponent’s longsword pierced his belly.

He didn’t feel the pain.

The third time Song Qingshi woke up, he sat in a stupor, wondering what had just happened.

An Long appeared before him, glowering. He grabbed Song Qingshi by the collar.

“Why? Why would you go so far for him?”

“You’re right! I shouldn’t have done that! I lost my mind.” Song Qingshi pulled himself out of his panic and recovered his calm. “I need to confirm something.”

Before An Long could respond, he jumped off the bed and ran for Golden Phoenix Stage again.

An Long didn’t have the patience for stupidity. His fist slammed against the wall, nearly putting a hole through it. But now wasn’t the time for a tantrum. He could deal with Song Qingshi’s dumbassery later, but he wouldn’t let him take another beating.

The same events repeated. The battle repeated.

A disheveled Song Qingshi appeared before Yue Wuhuan. This time, he had one question.

“A cage contains both chickens and rabbits, with a total of thirty-five heads and ninety-four feet. How many chickens and rabbits are there? Do the math and tell me the

answer, now!”

Chapter 47

YUE WUHUAN STOPPED as though he'd encountered a fatal error. Not a muscle in his face twitched.

How could Song Qingshi not understand what was going on after that? His genius little angel didn't need an abacus when he balanced the accounts. He'd even begun to study pure mathematics. He should've calculated the answer in the time it took to add one plus one.

An Long, meanwhile, was baffled by Song Qingshi's odd question. "Why are you locking the rabbits and chickens together? Whoever did that was stupid. Can't you just let them out and count?"

Song Qingshi ignored the class clown. The petals of his lotus blaze divided into a swarm of slender, fiery blades and bombarded "Yue Wuhuan." He'd mince the deceptive bootleg into a thousand pieces—how dare it embarrass him!

He should've known it wasn't Yue Wuhuan.

Yue Wuhuan was proud and stubborn. How could he die before killing those who had harmed him? Even if he *had* lost all hope, he'd never jump in front of Song Qingshi. He'd disappear silently, without making a fuss.

Song Qingshi's own stupidity frustrated him, but the nightmarish tableau on Golden Phoenix Stage shut down his reasoning as intended. His usual calm deserted him, so he'd fallen for the ruse twice over. What an embarrassment. Good thing Yue Wuhuan didn't know. Could Song Qingshi stand to face him, if he did?

He snuck a backward glance at the Alaskan malamute. "You're not allowed to tell Yue Wuhuan."

An Long's expression went dark as he stared at Song Qingshi. He didn't respond.

The false Wuhuan shattered, consumed by flame. Golden Phoenix Stage dwindled into nothing. Even the scenery disintegrated: The roads, the crowds, and the buildings

vanished as if in a dream. Everything went dark, and a pungent stench assailed them from all directions.

The world reconfigured. Putrid remains of dead animals bobbed in the waters of a dark, feculent swamp.

Song Qingshi covered his nose and staggered back. He'd smelled this somewhere before.

Not only was his cultivation suppressed, he was stuck at the foundation level. He had limited access to high-level techniques. His red lotus blaze was just a spark in his palm.

Song Qingshi sacrificed a few tiny flames to use as lights. They floated in midair, illuminating his search for signs of further danger. Thorny branches shot out of the mud as the light reached the deepest recess of the swamp. They clutched someone—Yue Wuhuan.

The mask and the traces of ghost snake venom had disappeared, revealing his pale, bloodless, but still pretty face. The brambles twined around him, biting at his skin and clothing, and filthy water concealed the lower half of his body. He had lost the energy to struggle, and he waited to die and decay like beautiful prey trapped in a web.

Yue Wuhuan took cleanliness seriously. Filthiness terrified him.

This was *his* nightmare.

Song Qingshi's heart twisted in pain. He wrapped the fox-fur cape around his neck and jumped. He waded through the swamp, ignorant of the surrounding filth. The mud sucked at his legs with each step. Patches of his pure white robes were stained black, and everything emitted an unbearable stench. But he didn't care.

Under the guidance of his red lotus blaze, he stumbled toward the brambles. He reached through the stinging thorns, ignoring the cuts they left on his skin, for the wounded bird in front of him.

"Wuhuan?" Song Qingshi murmured, patting his cheek. "Wake up, Wuhuan."

The bird in the cage woke from his deep sleep, his long lashes fluttering. Though filth covered the rest of his body, his beautiful eyes were clear. He hated the foul odor swirling in the air, enough that he longed to return to a stupor again. Then he caught a hint of clean, medicinal fragrance, saw the dreamlike white figure, and reality mingled with delusion. He wasn't sure where he was.

"Qingshi? Is that you?" he croaked.

"Yes, it's me!" Song Qingshi fretted over him. "Don't worry, I'll get you out of here!"

"Don't come closer, Zunzhu." Yue Wuhuan groaned, glancing around them. "It's filthy. I'm filthy. You'll be tainted…"

Song Qingshi tugged at the thorny branches. "Don't worry! This is just a dream! When we get out, you won't be dirty anymore!"

He ripped at the bramble with all his strength, hands wet with blood, before he realized he was being irrational. He had tools at his disposal, but he'd forgotten to use them.

Song Qingshi raised a hand and recalled the red lotus flames. He precisely burned through each and every thorned branch, avoiding Yue Wuhuan, then he wrenched out the last few embedded in Yue Wuhuan's flesh by hand.

Free from his restraints, Yue Wuhuan collapsed into Song Qingshi's arms.

Song Qingshi gently held Yue Wuhuan as he checked him over for injuries. His legs and hands were mangled to the point he couldn't move. This damn nightmare. Why did it have to be so real?

His heart ached. He had to ask. "What happened?"

"I don't know," Yue Wuhuan responded weakly. "I've been stuck in this disgusting swamp from the moment I woke up. I couldn't move my limbs and was too weak to escape, but I wanted to find you. I fought for so long, but I couldn't get out…"

In the past, the life seal had kept him bound to that same helpless despair. He had struggled up to the point of death, but when he opened his eyes, he had returned to the same spot.

The heart-devouring array played a cruel game. It leveraged every weapon it could to pierce the weakness in everyone's hearts. Each strike aimed for the throat and drew blood, sapping your reason and your judgment until you broke down. When you woke you started the cycle anew.

It wasn't a killing array; it was something much more sickening.

Song Qingshi removed his fur cape and bundled it around Yue Wuhuan, covering up the mud and filth. "Is this better?"

Song Qingshi's unmistakable scent still clung to the fur, diluting the stench. Yue Wuhuan buried his face in the fur and took a deep breath. He felt better, his mind clearer, and he had even regained some strength. He looked at the filth around them and closed his eyes in pain. He readied himself to leave Song Qingshi's embrace, endure his instinctual disgust, and walk out of the swamp.

Song Qingshi stopped him. "Your legs are too injured. Don't try to get down. Close your eyes and cover your nose, and don't look around. I'll carry you out."

Without room for argument, he pulled Yue Wuhuan onto his back.

Yue Wuhuan tried to resist. "I can walk."

“No, it’s too dirty here,” Song Qingshi reprimanded him. “You hate dirty things, so stay on my back and be good. Don’t move.”

Yue Wuhuan looked at the mud covering Song Qingshi, pained. “I hate you being dirtied even more.”

“It’s fine. My clothes were dirty already.” Song Qingshi waited until Yue Wuhuan stopped moving before he slowly headed for land. “You’re particularly bothered, but the smell doesn’t affect me that much. I can take it. And it’s not like it can’t be washed off. When we get out of here, we’ll disinfect everything. It’ll be clean then.”

Yue Wuhuan squeezed his arms around Song Qingshi’s shoulders as he buried his face in his neck. Sadness weighed on his heart with every breath of that comforting scent.

“What if…” Yue Wuhuan’s voice faltered. “What if it can’t be washed off?”

“Then we’ll wash it a few more times,” Song Qingshi said easily. “It always comes out eventually.”

“I can’t be washed clean,” Yue Wuhuan whimpered, burrowing closer.

“I’ll help you.”

Song Qingshi’s simple answer startled a laugh from Yue Wuhuan. They were thinking of completely different things, but the intent was sweet. He smoothed the soft wisps of Song Qingshi’s hair that were flying loose and snuck a kiss at his earlobe. He longed to wrap his lips around the cute little thing, but he couldn’t.

Song Qingshi’s earlobes were very sensitive, so he squeaked, “Don’t touch me there so suddenly! I’m ticklish.”

“I’m sorry. It was an accident.”

Even slogging through vile, pungent mud felt less terrible when they were together.

Song Qingshi’s heart grew lighter. When he thought about his earlier embarrassment, he had to ask: “A cage contains both chickens and rabbits, with a total of thirty-five heads and ninety-four feet. How many chickens and rabbits are there?”

“Twelve rabbits and twenty-three chickens. Why do you ask?”

“No reason.” Song Qingshi felt proud. “You’re a genius. I should have known.”

Yue Wuhuan toyed with a gold hair ornament that was swinging back and forth as Song Qingshi walked and asked the question he’d been wondering about. “Zunzhu, what is this?”

Song Qingshi’s ears blazed red and hot. He was still wearing that ridiculous outfit. He explained everything that had happened.

“I didn’t ask to look like a fool. Don’t laugh at me.”

“Don’t worry. In my eyes, you’ll never be one,” Yue Wuhuan said.

Song Qingshi still felt a little sorry for himself. “Wuhuan. Why am I dressed like a girl in your nightmare?” If Yue Wuhuan thought he wasn’t manly enough, he could work on it!

Yue Wuhuan froze. *Was* this his nightmare?

An Long stood on the shore, watching a familiar scene in a familiar story. Just one thing had changed: the protagonist.

This was his beautiful fantasy, better than anything an illusion bug could produce. He’d officially become partners with his beloved, just like he’d dreamed of. He was living the scene he’d chased after every night. He didn’t want to leave.

But it was all wrong.

The nightmare made him watch as he lost everything. His territory was slowly encroached upon. It even took the memory that he’d relied on in his most desperate moments, near death—the memory that had delivered him from pain, that belonged only to him. Now it was tainted with someone else.

All of his efforts had turned out a waste.

His hard work was a joke, his infatuation no more than bubbles.

Eight hundred years of love, eight hundred years of falling. His heart was like a moth drawn to flame. He knew he wouldn't achieve anything, he knew he was making a mistake, but he couldn't let go. He wagged his tail, begged, and whined for a sliver of hope.

Everything was his fault. He deserved it.

An Long's eyes stung as he watched the two wade through the swamp, talking and laughing.

In his mind, he heard a devilish, mocking voice he thought he'd left behind a long time ago:

Wake up. This is your nightmare.

Chapter 48

THE HEART-DEVOURING ARRAY broke and the scene disintegrated.

Song Qingshi opened his eyes and found himself lying in Yue Wuhuan's arms. A cocoon of bloodking vines held them together so securely they couldn't move to part.

The array had brought them to a rocky cave where a number of people lay in similar states, their faces frightened or in pain. They screamed, occasionally, but didn't wake. Not far from them lay an older cultivator whose face was full of panic. He was terribly injured but had his arms around a little girl who looked no more than ten, as if to protect her.

Yue Wuhuan was also awake. He retracted his vines, untangling them both, and rose to his feet. He seemed fine. His injuries had disappeared, but Song Qingshi worried about his mental state and took some medicine from his interspatial bag.

"Any discomfort? Do you need some heart-calming pills?"

Yue Wuhuan shook his head. Nothing troubled him, physically. The swamp had been disgusting, but it hadn't broken him.

He was also confused. If that had been his nightmare, fetid, repulsive swamps lacked a certain horror.

Song Qingshi popped a pill in his mouth anyway, before he took one himself. He used his spiritual powers to absorb the medicine faster, until his panic finally subsided.

An Long suddenly reached over and stole the entire bottle before emptying it into his mouth.

Song Qingshi stared; it took him a moment to do anything else.

"Do you think these are candy?! That's not good for you!"

An Long threw the empty bottle back to him. After a few seconds, his ugly complexion improved a little.

Song Qingshi finally realized An Long wasn't happy. But he hadn't bitten him, so maybe it wasn't because of him? Maybe he'd just been disgusted by the nightmare swamp?

Remembering how An Long had tried to protect him in the array, Song Qingshi bowed low. "Thank you again for your help."

An Long used the lock bug to stamp out the rising urge to riot inside himself and smiled rather savagely. "There's no need for thanks between us."

He couldn't afford a mistake.

In the dark, Song Qingshi could see An Long's eyes reddening—but then he glanced down, and by the time he looked back, he seemed back to normal.

"Let's destroy this damn array," he suggested. Destroying things was his expertise.

"Hold on." Song Qingshi stood on his tiptoes and pulled the Alaskan malamute's head closer to him. He ordered him to open his eyes wide, but he didn't find anything, even after careful examination. Perhaps he'd seen wrong?

"Zunzhu, let's save these people first?" Yue Wuhuan ventured.

"Yes." Song Qingshi abandoned An Long and turned his examination to the prone cultivators. Their nightmares still held them captive, and their spiritual senses had been severely damaged. In few serious cases, their spirits had shattered entirely. They'd go insane when they woke up if they weren't treated right away. He stabilized the patients' senses and held off the worst by directing spiritual power into their minds through acupuncture needles.

Yue Wuhuan searched all around with his vines, and found the eye of the array, confirming where exactly to attack it.

An Long whistled, though no audible sound came out. A teeming mass of bugs crawled in from parts unknown. They tore venomously at the wall carved with the eye of the array. The eye responded in kind, causing some casualties, but each bug's death resulted in a corrosive liquid that only hurried the destruction of the wall. More

reinforcements appeared to march over the toxic corpses of their comrades. They rushed forward, wave after wave, until the eye was destroyed.

Once the ancient array crumbled, everyone woke from their long nightmares.

An Long assigned a sleep bug to everyone, in case they screamed incessantly after they woke up. Song Qingshi rummaged through his pouch for stray heart-calming pills but found none. The glutton who'd emptied his stock received a glare, but Song Qingshi didn't dare reprimand him. Song Qingshi searched Yue Wuhuan's bag next and found a calming powder he could use. After dissolving it in some clean water, he fed it to everyone present. Then he ordered An Long to end his bug array so the sects could collect their people.

"Zunzhu, come look," Yue Wuhuan said unexpectedly.

Song Qingshi walked over. Under the vines and moss, the stone walls bore thin sword marks that seemed ordinary at first, but they were impossibly deep. Each mark contained a hatred that went to the marrow. The force it took to leave them would have annihilated millions.

This was the work of the sword master Mo Yuan: his sorrow, his madness. Yue Wuhuan nearly lost himself studying the marks, but Song Qingshi wasn't a swordsman. He didn't understand that sort of thing. He wandered for a bit, then noticed a rotting wooden box on the ground. It shattered the moment he picked it up. Inside, there was a piece of thin, tattered paper and a beautiful red gemstone—much to Song Qingshi's delight.

This was phoenix blood, one of the loveliest and most precious stones in the immortal realm. Phoenix blood assisted cultivation and nourished the wearer's dantian. This was a peerless specimen, worth a hundred thousand high-quality spiritual crystals. He'd coveted one on display at the Pavilion of Treasures a long time ago, and had wanted to get it for Yue Wuhuan, but he'd never had the money.

Now that the Medicine King's Valley was running well under Yue Wuhuan's management, Song Qingshi feared wasting that hard work with frivolous spending, so he hadn't bought it yet. Finding one on their adventure was quite fortunate.

Before Song Qingshi could open the ancient paper, it started to disintegrate. He only caught a single word: *Unsolvable*.

That sloppy handwriting…looked a lot like his own.

What a weird coincidence, right? Song Qingshi thought about it. He didn't like to make guesses, so he decided to let it go.

He wanted to present the stone to Yue Wuhuan, but Yue Wuhuan was still engrossed in the sword marks. Song Qingshi resolved to put it away and surprise him later.

"I've read so many books about Mo Yuan," Yue Wuhuan whispered, waking from his reverie. "None of them said what he looked like, or where he came from. No one knows how he died. He disappeared without a trace eight thousand years ago, after the Battle Against Demons."

That was true. Song Qingshi had never read otherwise.

Yue Wuhuan ran his hand over the marks on the wall and smiled bitterly. "I had some theories of my own. But now… Now that I see these marks, I'm even more sure Mo Yuan lost his mind. He was mad already, and the heart-devouring array pushed him over the edge…"

The era of the sword master had passed long ago. It had almost nothing to do with today. Song Qingshi didn't quite understand why Yue Wuhuan cared so much.

Yue Wuhuan saw his confusion. "It's nothing, really. I'm just curious what could have happened to the sword master who started off as a mere mortal. I want to find out for myself."

Song Qingshi sighed in relief. "I'll help you."

"There's no need." At some point, An Long had returned. He spoke dismissively. "Records from the Thousand Poison Sect say that after the Battle Against Demons, Mo Yuan joined the demon side. He murdered and massacred—all kinds of evil shit. The great Buddhist masters united the large sects and killed him together. *That* was his ending."

Yue Wuhuan went still, not knowing what to say.

"Wasn't Mo Yuan a hero?" Song Qingshi asked, confused. "All the ancient tomes *I've* read talk about his great deeds."

"It's not clear why he defected. For some reason, the news was kept hush-hush. Just a couple dozen words confidential to the master of Thousand Poison Sect say the sects lost a lot of yuanying-level cultivators. In the end, fenshen-level masters had to clean up the mess, killed him, and forbade anyone to ever speak of it again."

Eight thousand years had passed. The fenshen masters who participated had either ascended or fallen. The truth was lost to the river of time.

He pulled An Long to the side for a private discussion about the phoenix blood gem he'd just found. He valued fairness, so he would never keep loot secret.

"I know you're not interested in stuff like this. I'll take the water beast's remains and refine it with some heavenly grass for a nice beast-spirit elixir, and make up the difference with crystals. Is that all right?"

An Long's face darkened. "I don't remember you being interested in such things either."

"I want to give it to someone." Song Qingshi smiled awkwardly.

An Long knew who Song Qingshi wanted to give it to. He slowly closed his eyes. "Fine."

Jealousy gnawed at his heart. He craved blood. The voice in his head grew louder and louder.

He couldn't look, couldn't listen, couldn't want.

He couldn't afford a mistake…

After Song Qingshi treated the different disciples, outlined their treatment plans, and received his fees, the disciples were led away by fellow members of their sects.

Kindly Buddhists agreed to care for the few rogue cultivators left. The Red Dragon Sect's disciple embraced his teacher and martial siblings, weeping and laughing with none of the dignified restraint cultivators usually displayed. It was a moving scene; clearly, their bonds ran deep.

The master of the Red Dragon Sect was the middle-aged cultivator with the little girl in his arms. He'd protected his disciples, even though the beast had dealt him terrible injuries. His charges were lucky to have a teacher who cultivated moral principles as well as spiritual powers.

Song Qingshi hoped his own precious, beloved head disciple felt just as moved by this scene. He stole a glance at Yue Wuhuan, who was focused on collecting the beast's remains. Song Qingshi was a little disappointed.

An Long grumbled something about booze and left in a hurry once they reached land, but Song Qingshi was used to his weird temperament and didn't think much of it.

Song Qingshi offered to help the head of the Red Dragon Sect with his injuries. Song Qingshi admired the man's conduct, and he wanted to take the opportunity to ask how he'd gained his disciples' love and admiration. Said disciples rejoiced. Had a palanquin been available, they would've carried Song Qingshi back on it.

Yue Wuhuan followed Song Qingshi's lead, glad that he was happy.

Late in the night, deep in the forest, crows called out one after another.

An Long sat alone, clutching his head in pain. His eyes were red as blood and black scales covered his face. The skin under his tattoo of the Five Poisons had turned a mottled black, and his limbs kept transforming before they were suppressed.

That eerie voice that he thought was long gone spoke again. It wouldn't stop, and every word was a knife stabbed into his heart. He didn't want to hear it, but he had no choice.

You thought because you rolled over and wagged your tail, he'd love you?

Because you became strong enough to shield him from harm, he'd love you?

Because you narrowly escaped death, because you fought to climb to your current position, he'd love you?

Because you could be patient, tolerant, and bare your heart, he'd love you?

You thought he knocked at the door that night because he'd come to return your foolish feelings? You looked truly laughable at the time. You'd rather sacrifice your spy than give up the truth. How pathetic. How unbearably stupid.

Has chasing a fantasy ever given you the ending you desire, all those times you've used an illusion bug? Why do you startle awake every time? Is it because no matter your methods, no matter how you force him, he won't love you?

You're an insignificant insect who climbed out of the mud, put on a human face, and learned to speak because you wanted to get closer to the bright moon. How dare you. Are you worthy?

Wake up. Give up on having a human soul.

Wake up. You were made to be greedy, violent, and heartless. To take what you want.

"Shut up! Shut up!" An Long battered his head against a rock, as if once his skull split open, it would spill everything it contained. "Get out of my head!"

He couldn't afford a mistake.

He couldn't.

Chapter 49

THE MASTER OF THE RED DRAGON SECT, Yanyuan-xianjun, required many precious medicines for his injuries. Song Qingshi wiped away the more frightening memories by using acupuncture to direct spiritual power into his and his disciples' minds. The trauma would remain, but they would be fine so long as they didn't encounter similar situations in the future.

How much would the immortal realm's number one doctor cost if they counted the precious herbs and medicines as well?

The Red Dragon Sect members were ashamed to admit they didn't have many spiritual crystals. They sheepishly suggested an extended repayment made month by month.

Song Qingshi liked them, and his pockets were full of the allowance his little angel had given him, so his "high roller" tendencies immediately came online. He magnanimously waived their treatment fees. The entire sect was so thankful they were moved to tears, and once they found out he was a bibliophile, they offered to copy their proprietary book of secret talismans and arrays for him.

Talismans weren't difficult to make—just tedious. Most cultivators chose to buy them. Foundlings made up the bulk of the sect's disciples, so they weren't especially talented cultivators. They learned talisman-making from their teacher, who assigned them jobs based on their capabilities. They stuck to their routines and rules and stayed out of trouble.

The girl Yanyuan-xianjun had been protecting was precocious, clever Niannian, a born talisman master. Song Qingshi had endless praise for her improved fire-control talisman and asked Yue Wuhuan to order a thousand. He copied some of the Medicine King's Valley's unique, ancient talismans and arrays for her to study in exchange. To Yanyuan-xianjun's dismay, Niannian found one of the illusion talismans incredibly inspirational and became so fascinated with it she forgot to eat or drink.

Yanyuan-xianjun worried for her, so when his injuries improved, he gave her a harsh scolding. Niannian whined and pestered her teacher while her martial siblings teased her.

"If you don't find some time to rest, I'll marry you off," Yanyuan-xianjun said, exaggeratedly stern.

"No!" Niannian pleaded and pouted for mercy. "I want to stay with Shifu forever and fulfill my filial duties."

Between the master and his disciples, they were a happy bunch. Song Qingshi felt jealous, for some reason.

Seniority didn't matter when it came to learning. Expertise did. He decided to discreetly ask Yanyuan-xianjun for advice on being a good teacher. He wanted to learn how to make his disciples as happy as Yanyuan-xianjun's so they'd stay forever.

Yanyuan-xianjun wasn't like his naive little disciples. He knew the Medicine King had a fierce reputation inconsistent with his delicate appearance. He quailed at Song Qingshi's aggressive approach, so scared he almost dropped to his knees. He'd surely be dragged off and experimented on because he didn't have the money to pay his debts. When Song Qingshi asked him how to be a better teacher, his brain short-circuited. Was he still in the nightmare?

"Please, go ahead," Song Qingshi said earnestly, producing a brush and paper.

"I don't do anything special. I just teach them skills." Yanyuan-xianjun assumed his savior wanted some special techniques to exert further control over his lovely, ruined disciple. He gritted his teeth. "Um, maybe… I sometimes cook for them? They all like my noodles. They come back from every trip craving a big bowl, saying they just doesn't taste the same elsewhere. Niannian likes soft noodles. Huanghe likes them harder. He Xiaoxiao adds chili, and Yue-er doesn't like green onions."

The unassuming middle-aged cultivator's eyes gentled as he spoke.

Song Qingshi summarized his advice:

1. The most important ingredient is your feelings.

2. The way to a disciple's heart is through his stomach.

3. Learn to cook?

It had been a mistake, never learning to cook. From now on, he'd study well.

And Song Qingshi was a man of action! He dragged Yanyuan-xianjun to the kitchen at once, ready to apply the scientific method to making noodles.

As a master of elixir-making, he could weigh ingredients by touch and write the measurements down to the gram. He recorded the technique for kneading the dough and the required force, including the frequency and direction. He noted the dough's softness and texture when it was ready to cut, and the correct thickness to cut it. He observed the humidity and temperature, his equipment's material and thickness, the fire's heat and intensity over the cooking period, and the time he dropped the noodles into the water down to the second.

Finally, he recreated every step for satisfactory noodles.

Yanyuan-xianjun was baffled. He had never seen anyone cook like him.

Song Qingshi tasted his achievement and deemed it a success, so he ran off with the noodles in tow to find Yue Wuhuan.

Yue Wuhuan was in his room, reading. The Red Dragon Sect had created talismans for many years and their work had plenty of unique touches. Their library also contained a few unique, interesting tomes that recorded information and techniques that could not be found elsewhere. He was learning new ways to improve his poison puppets.

Suddenly, Song Qingshi ran in and presented him with a bowl as though it contained treasure, not noodles in soy sauce broth.

Yue Wuhuan examined the noodles with nothing but green onions and was lost for a while. Then he took the chopsticks and had a taste. The ingredients seemed quite fresh, but the taste was neither great nor terrible. The regular, homemade taste didn't

compare to his noodles in turkey broth. But judging by Song Qingshi's eager expression…

"My sincerest praise to the Red Dragon Sect's kitchen," Yue Wuhuan said. "I've never tasted such delicious noodles."

Song Qingshi felt like he'd just formulated a batch of finicky elixirs and was delighted. Still, he stayed humble. "It can't be that good."

Yue Wuhuan indulged him and finished the noodles with a smile, down to the last slurp of soup. "It's the thought that counts, Zunzhu."

"I've cooked before, so I have experience." Song Qingshi worried Yue Wuhuan had caught on to his motive. At least he *had* cooked before, even though he'd fed a child fasting elixirs and almost poisoned the Alaskan malamute with sticky rice cake. He just lacked confidence. "Anyway, if you like it, I'll make it every day. No, not every day. Sometimes I have to conduct experiments. But I'll make it for you whenever I can."

Yue Wuhuan was a little confused. He didn't think someone who would rather work than eat would take an interest in cooking.

"Yanyuan-xianjun said good masters cook for their disciples. But eating noodles every day would be boring, right?" His little angel made all sorts of delicious food. "Do you like dumplings, wontons, or jianbing? Cakes or other sweets? I can learn… Don't worry. I pick up things fast. It won't take long."

It seemed Song Qingshi had misunderstood something.

Yue Wuhuan looked at Song Qingshi's hopeful expression and felt the lock bug inside of him grow restless. His feelings toward Song Qingshi surged for a moment, out of control, before the bug siphoned them away. He put down the empty bowl.

"Zunzhu, you don't need to do anything for me." He liked it too much. If it was just on occasion, he could restrain himself; if it continued long-term, it would expose his true feelings.

Those desires couldn't see the light of day. Like embers in ash, feeding them oxygen would cause a fire that burned everything in its wake. He'd spiral out of control.

That was the last thing he wanted.

Don't entice me into losing control…

Song Qingshi understood his reluctance after a moment of thought. Yue Wuhuan was ten times more skilled than him, to his dismay. He deserved all the good in the world, but he was so smart, so capable, Song Qingshi believed he could do anything and everything… What more was there to give him? He didn't know what he could do to treat him better, make him happier.

Once Yue Wuhuan fully recovered, what if he thought the Medicine King's Valley was boring? What if he wanted to leave?

Song Qingshi would return to staring at clouds on his own…

He spent a while lost in thought before he collected himself. Failure was nothing new to him. More importantly, Yue Wuhuan was still by his side. He didn't need to regret something that hadn't happened. He could still try his best.

He pulled Yue Wuhuan's hand toward him and put the phoenix blood gem into his palm. "Here's some loot from Mo Yuan's cave. I got it from An Long, and now it's yours."

The sword marks had absorbed Yue Wuhuan to a point that he hadn't noticed the private negotiations over the gemstone.

Golden flecks shimmered throughout the fiery red gem, dragging radiance behind them like comet tails. It was as if a brilliant phoenix giving off a warm aura was sealed within. The color was bright but not garish and its surface was without imperfections. It was just what Yue Wuhuan liked.

He *loved* it. He'd treasure it forever.

He wanted Song Qingshi to wear it, for his color to claim a little of that pure white.

Yue Wuhuan thought of that beautiful sight and a secret joy bloomed in his heart. He smiled.

Song Qingshi was thrilled; his gift succeeded where cooking hadn't. He would continue studying the way Yanyuan-xianjun taught his disciples: teaching them to draw talismans stroke by stroke, waking them early for martial arts, or studying with them. He'd try everything. He could handle mistakes. As long as he gave it enough thought and tried everything, he'd find something Yue Wuhuan liked. He'd make Yue Wuhuan love living in the valley enough to stay. They would study, experiment, make elixirs, play, adventure together.

Wouldn't that be the most heavenly life?!

Song Qingshi ran off to pick every last nugget of advice from the crevices of poor Yanyuan-xianjun's brain. Yue Wuhuan let him go, exasperated, and went to the talisman workshop. He had some questions about drawing talismans for the Red Dragon disciples, and he wanted to borrow materials for a few experiments.

The disciples told him everything they knew. He occupied an empty worktable to try his hand at making talismans, and couldn't help but overhear a whispered discussion:

"The euphoria talismans haven't sold since the Cantong Sect massacre and Guiyuan-xianzun's fall. Don't make too many."

"What an awful way to die. Zhao-shixiong didn't eat for three days after he tried to make that delivery, he was so terrified."

"Good thing that other guy didn't come, otherwise Zhao-shixiong might've peed his pants."

"It's a pity. That talisman turns a good profit. You could try going out to sell it?"

"Piss off! Advertising in the red-light districts—do you want Shifu to break my leg?!"

"Ha, you've caught me!"

Yue Wuhuan's brush paused. Cantong Sect wiped out? Guiyuan-xianzun defeated?

He fell into deep thought.

Guiyuan-xianzun was a name Yue Wuhuan had never wanted to hear or think of ever again. He'd forgone revenge to treat Song Qingshi. All these years, he'd avoided thinking of Cantong Sect and refused to learn anything about it in case it drove him mad. He didn't have the time or ability to kill Guiyuan-xianzun. He couldn't dwell on him.

But the Guiyuan-xianzun Yue Wuhuan remembered had tact. He was clever, and he took care not to offend anyone stronger than him. How had he died violently? Who was "that other guy"?

Yue Wuhuan turned around wearing an eager smile. "What an interesting story. Could you tell me more?"

Chapter 50

THE DISCIPLES SWORE a swarm of insects had destroyed Cantong Sect. Yue Wuhuan took note.

Ever since Yue Wuhuan noticed the way a certain someone coveted his treasure, he had paid special attention to the Thousand Poison Sect. Through careful collection of information and the help of Night Rain Pavilion, nothing escaped his attention.

The Thousand Poison Sect ruled over Xilin. They claimed a few spiritual crystal mines and resource-rich secret realms, and in addition, eighteen cities paid tribute to them.

The people of Xilin were fierce and bloodthirsty. Harming their own wasn't taboo. They liked to fight, and they respected whoever came out on top.

An Long was the most talented bug master in the history of the Thousand Poison Sect. After becoming the Poison King, he'd achieved an uneasy peace by purging anyone that refused to acknowledge him. But there were still other major players within the sect. They were like venomous insects raised in a jar named Xilin. They devoured each other, ready to create a stronger king at any moment, but they didn't develop their territories or establish long-term rule.

The Thousand Poison Sect was a complicated place, but its quirks gave the Medicine King's Valley a sliver of a chance. Yue Wuhuan had worried that once An Long discovered Song Qingshi's state, he'd mobilize his sect, attack the valley, and seize command. Yue Wuhuan had even prepared to abandon the valley if necessary, take a few resources, and flee with Song Qingshi.

But An Long had chosen to keep quiet about it. He tried to break through the array alone, without relying on Thousand Poison Sect's power, regardless of the peril. He refused to endanger the Medicine King's Valley.

Yue Wuhuan had investigated the rumors surrounding An Long. They were all false. An emotion bug had controlled the female cultivators who'd caused a ruckus

outside the valley, all those years ago, as a feint to draw out Song Qingshi.

An Long circled his prey like a starving wolf that feared getting closer. He kept his distance, testing the waters, trying to find the perfect position.

It was unclear how his feelings had come to be, but the amount of endurance he demonstrated was terrifying.

It unsettled Yue Wuhuan. That wasn't love. It was a strange madness.

No matter its name, it was… It was too disgusting…

Why was this world so disgusting? A foul odor permeated everything, and he couldn't wash it away no matter how he tried. Why did affection always come with lust? Wouldn't it be good to live like Song Qingshi? The world already teemed with filth. Need it defile his only pure treasure too?

He'd rejoiced when Song Qingshi woke up, but he couldn't hide him in the secret room anymore. He had to find a new way to protect him.

The evil wolf An Long had long since lost its utility. He presented a greater danger: a constant enticement for Song Qingshi to leave the valley and taste life. That couldn't happen under any circumstance. His Song Qingshi should remain in the confines of the Medicine King's Valley, white as a sheet of paper, tarnished by nothing inferior, including himself…

Hateful. It was all too hateful.

Without thinking, Yue Wuhuan dug his nails into his wrist and drew blood. Pain let him think clearly.

He'd thought about many ways to kill An Long, but he realized now that just killing him wasn't enough. Though Song Qingshi himself hadn't realized how much he cared for their friendship, An Long's death would be a constant regret. A dead friend's memory could only grow more beautiful, leaving Song Qingshi forever stuck on it. Yue Wuhuan would never purge An Long from Song Qingshi's heart if that happened.

He'd thought he had a problem with no solution, but Guiyuan-xianzun's death presented a new opportunity.

Murderers committed the deed for profit, for love or hate, from fury, as revenge —or to silence someone. Cantong Sect was in Nanshan, where they ran several brothels and gambling houses. They had no conflicts of interest with the Thousand Poison Sect.

Guiyuan-xianzun might've been an immoral piece of trash, but he never provoked anyone stronger than him. The Xilin Poison King's fierce reputation was known far and wide, and he had a distinctive appearance. Guiyuan-xianzun would never have been foolish enough to offend him, so An Long likely hadn't killed him out of hatred, or for revenge. Cantong Sect didn't own any notable treasure, either.

He must've been silenced. What had happened ten years ago? Why had An Long gone so far?

Yue Wuhuan tried to bear the disgust long enough to remember anything he knew about Guiyuan-xianzun…

He stopped in his tracks.

Guiyuan-xianzun had been there the day Yue Wuhuan first met Song Qingshi. He'd been tied to the tree and blindfolded, so he couldn't see anything, nor did he have his cultivation. There was no way for him to use his spiritual senses to check his surroundings and listen to things further away.

At the time, he'd been drugged, and the effects hadn't worn off yet. He faded in and out of focus. He could only vaguely remember that Guiyuan-xianzun stopped at one point, as though noticing something.

"I can't believe that's what he looks like. How laughable," he sneered.

Yue Wuhuan had investigated after the fact because of those words, and they led to his meeting the finest individual in the whole world…

It left a beautiful memory smeared with grime. He tried to avoid dwelling on it.

Back then, he'd watched as Song Qingshi lay on the ground—and stopped breathing. He'd been clean from head to toe, without a drop of blood or trace of a fight on him. Yue Wuhuan assumed he'd suffered an accident or sudden illness somehow, and

started to go get help. But before he got far, Song Qingshi sat up, stumbled to the river, and began to cry.

Yue Wuhuan thought he'd seen wrong, that was all.

He tried to subtly ask Song Qingshi about it, after they grew closer, and learned that something had happened to Song Qingshi's soul. He'd lost his memories just prior to falling unconscious. He was confused on waking, so he acted abnormally.

Signs indicated that Song Qingshi's soul had indeed fractured before it fused together again, a phenomenon called "soul flight." It was rare, but ancient books recorded similar cases. Some masters allowed their souls to wander through three thousand different worlds to train for their tribulation. Yue Wuhuan didn't think much of it then.

Now he did. Perhaps something *was* a little odd?

Had Guiyuan-xianzun intended to call Song Qingshi "laughable," or someone else?

Had something happened that day that required his silence?

All the clues connected. His eyes lit up, and he trembled with excitement at what occurred to him then. He had found a way to excise that man from Song Qingshi's heart. Then he'd replace all their happy memories, swap fond feelings for hatred… No. Hatred wasn't enough. It was best if he forgot everything.

There was no rush. Yue Wuhuan could take it slow.

He'd wear his sheepskin and play a gentle, harmless lamb.

As long as he didn't do anything disgusting, didn't sully his treasure…he would never get hurt.

Song Qingshi strove for perfection when he studied. Not a single detail escaped him.

He bugged Yanyuan-xianjun until he unlocked all sorts of new disciple techniques, like having heart-to-heart conversations, drinking with them, going shopping, telling bedtime stories, etc.

Yanyuan-xianjun hadn't known what he was even talking about by the end of it. He'd recounted changing his disciples' diapers and feeding them goat milk.

Song Qingshi considered their disciples' different ages. He had disregarded methods that were irrelevant based on age initially, but what if Yue Wuhuan one day accepted a disciple of his own? Who was only three and a half years old? And he couldn't change a diaper, and Yue Wuhuan deemed him useless? It was better to be prepared.

At a knock on the door, Song Qingshi hid his notes, flipped open the book of talismans and arrays, and pretended to read seriously.

Yue Wuhuan entered carrying a bowl of sweet soup.

His need to maintain cleanliness had grown stronger over the course of the trip. Outside food was entirely unclean. Not only did he bring his own utensils when they ate at restaurants, he prepared a set for Song Qingshi as well. His appetite was not great either. He ate a few bites at every meal, and relied on a fasting elixir for the rest of his body's needs. Song Qingshi didn't dare go to restaurants much anymore, lest the food there make Yue Wuhuan uncomfortable.

Yue Wuhuan bemoaned the trouble he'd brought Song Qingshi and threw himself into improving his cooking. No matter what Song Qingshi wanted, whether it was a small snack or a lavish main dish, Yue Wuhuan could make them all. Not only that, his dishes were exquisite, more flavorful, and slightly sweeter, to suit Song Qingshi's tastes. His stomach was thoroughly spoiled.

He grew pickier, and fussy too. Every time he witnessed a street vendor touching a customer's order, he felt queasy. His little angel made cleaner, tastier food.

An Long moped because he could no longer drag Song Qingshi around on quests for snacks.

Song Qingshi happily accepted the sweet soup and took a sip. His eyes curved into satisfied crescent moons.

"You really are the best cook," he said. "I can't stomach outside food anymore."

“It’s not hygienic,” Yue Wuhuan said, smiling sweetly. “Just eat what I cook from now on, Zunzhu.”

Song Qingshi accepted his affection without question. He enjoyed everything Yue Wuhuan brought him. With each spoonful of sweet soup he grew more determined to cement his relationship with Yue Wuhuan, so he would want to stay in the Medicine King’s Valley even after he recovered. If Yue Wuhuan wanted to expand his horizons and improve his cultivation, they could travel the world together!

He wanted to be Yue Wuhuan’s teacher, his friend, his family…

But his heart was empty. It disconcerted him. He sensed he’d done something wrong or missed something, but he couldn’t say why.

“I haven’t seen An-dage recently. Where did he go?” Yue Wuhuan asked.

“Huh?” Song Qingshi looked up from his bowl. He hadn’t expected Yue Wuhuan to express more concern for An Long than he did. Had their adventure planted the seed for a budding friendship? The novel was *that* useful?

“Don’t worry,” he replied, touched. “He’s obsessed with catching bugs and other toxic things. He goes deep into the mountains to trap them, and if he finds something interesting he might not return for weeks. This is normal. We can wait for him in South Sea City.”

Yue Wuhuan’s worried expression remained.

“He’s a yuanying cultivator, and he looks tough, too. No one’s going to bother him.”

Yue Wuhuan nodded. “I’m overthinking things.”

“He’s always getting into trouble,” Song Qingshi said, after giving it some thought. “Don’t copy his bad habits and run off. Stick with me.”

Yue Wuhuan might have grown stronger, but he was still a gentle, gorgeous beauty. He used the deadly poison and bloodking vines to protect himself; they didn’t count. His little angel had suffered enough on his behalf. Now that Song Qingshi was awake, he was responsible for guarding Yue Wuhuan against bullies.

“All right.” Yue Wuhuan could tell what he was thinking. He smoothed Song Qingshi’s flyaway hair, chuckling.

Why did he trust him so much, so blindly? He stepped into his traps as though he knew what Yue Wuhuan wanted. Yue Wuhuan had absolute control over the valley, including its funds and resources. He changed Song Qingshi’s life and habits as he pleased. Song Qingshi believed him, no matter what he said; Song Qingshi didn’t question him, no matter what he did. Everything went according to his wishes.

Was it meant to be so easy? It was almost unbelievable, unsettling.

He rested his cheek on the table and observed Song Qingshi. Yue Wuhuan felt the desire to test him.

Song Qingshi met his probing look. “What are you thinking about?”

“Zunzhu, I was thinking…” Yue Wuhuan’s voice dwindled. “You never seem to get mad at me.”

“You’ve never done anything to make me mad.” He’d just spoken when he noticed the bloodking vines creeping toward him. They moved slowly, before the lot of them formed a lattice around him. They stroked his waist, hands, and feet, probing for something as if they wanted to pounce and trap him at a moment’s notice.

“What is it?” Song Qingshi asked, hesitating a little as he looked at the dancing vines massed overhead.

“What if I have?” Yue Wuhuan asked, half joking. He cared about the answer more than he’d realized. “What if I’m not who you think I am, and I did something that made you angry? Would you hate me?”

Song Qingshi had never considered the possibility. He contemplated it, then grinned.

“I wouldn’t.” He pinched the part of Yue Wuhuan’s face exposed by the mask, then tousled his hair and grinned. “I can’t get angry with Wuhuan, no matter what he does. I could never hate you.”

Yue Wuhuan froze. The vines retreated slowly.

He sighed. “You don’t understand anything.”

For ten years he had watched the man sleep, imagining the sweet, gentle courtship the illusion bug had shown him. But every time he closed his eyes, he dreamed that he was a frenzied, wild beast. His reason deserted him. He wanted control, to possess, to dominate. He did terrible things in his madness, biting the hand that fed him. He couldn’t bear the things that had happened to him, yet he wanted to take it out on the person he loved. And he could do whatever he wanted, because Song Qingshi wouldn’t understand or fight back.

Yue Wuhuan had so much he longed to unleash.

He was no longer under the influence of drugs, but his lust was still stronger and more virulent than the average person’s. Perhaps he had been born with a dark heart. He’d suffered great pain and knew how disgusting it was to feel that, but he wanted to inflict the same upon his beloved nonetheless. What kind of shameless monster was he?

He didn’t want to sleep. He didn’t want to dream. The happier his dream, the more the waking would sicken him.

But he could restrain himself. He’d suppress the urge, even if he had to rely on drugs. He would keep himself in check and never despoil Song Qingshi.

He wanted to tuck him into a warm, soft nest, care for his every need, shield him from everything unclean. Then they could live without worry. Yue Wuhuan would do anything to be the only sight reflected in those clear eyes. No one else was allowed in his heart.

And Yue Wuhuan would conceal the darkness in his own heart. Decisively, he tipped his head down and extinguished the flames of his longing.

He didn’t seem very happy. Song Qingshi leaned close and patted Yue Wuhuan’s shoulder in reassurance. “Don’t be afraid. I’ll never get angry, no matter what you do.”

Dry, medicinal fragrance lingered in Yue Wuhuan’s parched throat. He buried his face in Song Qingshi’s shoulder, mumbling.

“I won’t. I won’t do anything…”

Chapter 51

A FRANTIC KNOCK rattled the door, just before a Red Dragon Sect disciple ran in.

"Someone here from Golden Phoenix Mountain is asking to see the Medicine King. This is the list of gifts they brought."

Song Qingshi nearly spat out his sweet soup. He glanced uneasily at Yue Wuhuan's dark expression.

Song Qingshi would swear to the heavens: He had nothing to do with that damned sect, nor did he want anything to do with it.

But the immortal realm held Golden Phoenix Mountain in high regard, and the Red Dragon Sect disciples hadn't seen much of the world. The heap of gifts terrified them; there was no time for thought. They'd run to inform Song Qingshi of the situation right away, indirectly confirming the Medicine King's presence among them. With the letter and list of gifts delivered right to him, he couldn't make an excuse or defer it.

He glanced over the list of rare flowers and extraordinary herbs, each one a dagger to the heart. No! For his little angel, he had to send this garbage packing!

Pained, Song Qingshi pushed the gift list away as if he hadn't seen its contents. He slammed his fist on the table. "I won't see them!"

Yue Wuhuan glanced at the letter and said, "There's no harm in it."

Song Qingshi couldn't keep up his furious expression as it turned to one of disbelief.

Smiling, Yue Wuhuan took the list from the disciple and looked it over. "They're already here. We should at least figure out what they want. Go prepare somewhere for us to receive our guests. Is the smaller reception chamber all right?"

The Red Dragon Sect disciple agreed and left in a hurry.

“Why do we have to see them?” Song Qingshi pulled on Yue Wuhuan’s sleeve. “They’re animals. I *hate* them. I’d burn the whole damn place down if I could get away with it.”

“Rest assured, Zunzhu.” Yue Wuhuan pointed to the letter’s signatory. “It’s not Jin Feiren. It’s that slave, Bai Zihao—no, he’s not a slave anymore. He’s Jin Feiren’s most precious treasure. He suffered a bite from a flame wolf in the Inferno Realm to protect Bai Zihao. Apparently, they’ll be married soon.”

Song Qingshi thought the name rang a bell. It took him a long time to remember the white-robed youth he’d once seen at Langgan Stage.

The bloodking vines wrapped around his wrist and squeezed, then wiggled his hand to and fro, like a playful kitten.

“He’s not a bad guy.” Yue Wuhuan chuckled. “Zunzhu, go see him. I’m curious what he wants.”

Song Qingshi couldn’t refuse his little angel. He had to say yes, no matter his own reservations…

Yue Wuhuan helped him fix his messy hair, dusted his robes with a few cleaning spells, and fussed over him until he appeared as dignified as the Medicine King should. He urged Song Qingshi off to the garden to their guest, while he sent a few vines to trail him as supervision.

Song Qingshi reached the garden feeling sorry for himself, an expression like one of his experiments had just failed on his face as he sat down. He tapped on the table impatiently with his fingers, hoping it was clear that he didn’t want to waste his time on chitchat.

His motions stalled when a disciple led the guest from Golden Phoenix Mountain into the garden. Nothing in the world compared to Yue Wuhuan’s beauty, but Bai Zihao had also left a deep impression. He was like the bright, clear moon. There wasn’t anything overtly stunning about his appearance, but it was hard to look away from him.

He seemed even lovelier now, like a flower that had been trimmed, cut, and placed in a vase at the peak of bloom for everyone to admire and tease.

He was beautiful, and he didn't seem miserable…

Jin Feiren really had fallen for him, and he'd gone from a slave to Jin Feiren's partner. Bai Zihao had secured a lofty position, to the envy of everyone in the immortal realm.

Song Qingshi felt uncomfortable. Something was off.

Bai Zihao knew Song Qingshi didn't like beating around the bush. He bowed politely and made a direct request. "I heard the Medicine King acquired spiritual beads from a thousand-year-old demonic water beast. Golden Phoenix Mountain would like to have one, if you would be willing to part with it."

The spiritual beads had uses beyond making aqua powder. They were an amazingly effective treatment for elemental fire damage. Bai Zihao had water elemental spiritual roots, but he hadn't asked for aqua powder. He asked for the bead itself. Clearly, it wasn't intended for him, but for that human sewage, Jin Feiren.

Song Qingshi couldn't find the words to curse him in his fury. He turned and left with a swish of his long sleeves.

Bai Zihao knew about Song Qingshi's eccentric personality; he hadn't expected success on the first try. After he left, he rented a room in the nearby town and prepared to chip away at Song Qingshi over a few days. He was beautiful and good-natured, which made him easy to like. Offering generous tips to a few Red Dragon Sect disciples had them leaking information, so he could plan a "coincidental" encounter with Song Qingshi every once in a while.

Song Qingshi took total responsibility for his patients' care. He only left their sides once he felt certain they were in stable condition and well on their way to healing.

Yanyuan-xianjun wasn't a very talented cultivator, and he was on the older side. He wasn't in the peak of health, and he had plenty of chronic complaints that interfered

with his recovery. Song Qingshi decided to stay a few extra days to make sure he pulled through, since he had taught him so much about being a good teacher.

But Bai Zihao's continued pestering made him want to pack up and leave…

"That animal Jin Feiren knows you're my disciple by now, right?" Song Qingshi complained. "How dare he ask for a spiritual bead? Don't worry, Wuhuan. I'll never bend! No matter how he begs—"

"Give it to him," Yue Wuhuan said.

Song Qingshi nearly choked on his next breath. He grabbed his kind little angel by the hand and admonished him like a loyal subject persuading a foolish ruler.

"Wuhuan, do *not* repay evil with kindness."

"That's not what I mean. Jin Feiren sent Bai Zihao to get the water spiritual bead in particular. Bai Zihao… We have too much in common for me to hate him. In fact, we have a kinship. He's kind, he pleaded with Jin Feiren on my behalf before, and he saw to my care. I don't bear him any malice."

Song Qingshi paused for a moment. "But he's doing it for Jin Feiren."

"If he doesn't get the bead, he'll be punished." Yue Wuhuan sneered, "Jin Feiren's lust and creativity for punishment knows no bounds. He won't spare Bai Zihao just because he's the favorite. Zunzhu, you must've spotted the marks on his neck and wrists. If you check with your spiritual senses, you'll find even more. He must beg. He has no choice. There's a worse fate in store if he returns empty-handed."

"But…doesn't Jin Feiren like him? Aren't they about to be married?" Song Qingshi didn't understand. Surely no one wanted to see their beloved suffer?

"Those that Jin Feiren favors end up like Bai Zihao. The ones that lose favor end up like me." Yue Wuhuan smiled.

The difference between the two was that one would be ruined by one person, while the other would be tormented by many.

Song Qingshi felt disgusted to the point of nausea. He didn't know what to say.

“There’s no need to take it out on Bai Zihao. He’s just a poor, helpless soul.” Thinking of the lambskin he hid under, Yue Wuhuan let himself show some pity for Bai Zihao. However, he was still rational. “There are other ways to heal wounds received in the Inferno Realm, but it’s more difficult and painful. Jin Feiren is extending an olive branch by sending Bai Zihao, toward whom I have some goodwill. We’re no match for Golden Phoenix Mountain, so we might as well demonstrate our sincerity and accept their gifts to avoid further misunderstandings.”

Occasionally, the slaves that left Golden Phoenix Mountain ended up in better circumstances after gaining their new master’s favor. As mortals, nothing they did drew undue attention, so their behavior didn’t reflect on or cause any trouble for Golden Phoenix Mountain. The Medicine King’s Valley led a peaceful existence. There was no need to grant them importance. But over the last few years, Yue Wuhuan had caused plenty of commotion; it was difficult to ignore him any longer.

Even though Yue Wuhuan had refrained from getting involved with Golden Phoenix Mountain out of concern for Song Qingshi’s safety, Jin Feiren had grown suspicious of the valley regardless. Sending Bai Zihao was also a way to test Song Qingshi’s attitude toward him. If they didn’t handle this well, it might cause them issues down the line.

Song Qingshi calmed down. Though he could reason all he wanted, it still felt wrong. He wasn’t happy with his lot, but the indignity motivated him to work harder.

“After we return from this trip, let’s cancel my planned experiments.” Song Qingshi took a deep breath. He decided to set aside his hobbies to develop something more important. “When I studied *Nie’s Book of Poison*, I saw room for improving on both the Floral Zhen Poison and the Black Butterfly of Death. I want to create a poison that can kill a fenshen-level cultivator. Help me?”

He wanted to study toxicology so he could kill that scum, Jin Feiren, and get revenge for Yue Wuhuan!

“All right, I’ll help you. Let’s buy some poison kelp when we get to South Sea City.” Yue Wuhuan poked Song Qingshi’s puffed-up, angry cheeks. “Don’t be mad,

Zunzhu. You don't need to take this seriously. I'll give the spiritual bead to Bai Zihao for you. We haven't seen each other in so long. We have some catching up to do."

The Medicine King's Valley took precedence, and his current goal outweighed his hatred of Golden Phoenix Mountain.

He had something to ask that stupid boy.

Song Qingshi didn't trust Golden Phoenix Mountain. Bai Zihao looked harmless, but powerful, skilled bodyguards had accompanied him. Yue Wuhuan said Jin Feiren sent people he had never encountered before, probably on purpose, but what if he had missed something?

He wouldn't leave Yue Wuhuan's side. He'd protect him, no matter what.

Yue Wuhuan had no choice but to let Song Qingshi come since he insisted on accompanying him into town. Bai Zihao had occupied their previous accommodations, so he wasn't hard to find.

Song Qingshi sat in a tree and stared up at the clouds. His mind drifted, but he kept his spiritual senses trained on Yue Wuhuan's safety. It wasn't too long before he was alerted by some commotion.

It was sunset, and the town was bustling. Hardworking villagers joked and laughed with each other on their way home. The cowherd serenaded a girl who had just returned from picking lotuses. She smacked him across the face with her bundle of flowers. Two women by the river traded insults, then improbably reconciled. Song Qingshi made note of a few jabs to use on the Alaskan malamute.

A smiling farmer strolled through the fields with a wild deer slung over his shoulders.

"I found this at the foot of the mountains today!" he called to his friends. "Break out the good dishes. And the nice wine! No one's going home until we're all drunk." His friends agreed readily and reached out to stroke the fat deer.

When Song Qingshi saw the deer, he stiffened.

A moment later, he scrambled out of the tree. He snatched the deer out of the man's grasp and burned it to ash, red lotus blazing in his palm.

The farmers stared at him like they'd seen a ghost.

He tried to explain. "This—y-you can't eat—you can't touch—"

They turned and ran before he finished speaking.

Song Qingshi caught the farmer and circled him in flames of the underworld to stop him from getting away.

The farmer wet himself in terror. He kowtowed furiously, with tears streaming down his face. "O Great Immortal, please spare me!"

Song Qingshi didn't know how to free the words trapped in his throat. He turned them over, this way and that, but by the time he had a working draft the farmer had already fled with the rest of the villagers.

"The deer died from eating poisonous grass. The poison accumulated in its skin and fur.

"I wanted to get rid of the poison…

"Don't be afraid. I won't harm you."

Song Qingshi stood by the road, speaking to no one.

He stood there for a long, long time before expanding his senses. A swarm of bugs under his control sought and found the harmful grass. He destroyed it, then checked the surroundings for more. Finally he returned to his tree.

He stared up at the clouds. They were so pretty.

He missed Yue Wuhuan—and he was a little sad…

Chapter 52

BAI ZIHAO WORRIED at his nails.

Jin Feiren had taken that bite from a flame wolf in the Inferno Realm to protect him, and it was very serious. Although they had medicine to prevent the spread of the flame poison and they were slowly curing it, Jin Feiren still spent every second suffering through burning pain. Bai Zihao endured Jin Feiren's violent temper to care for him, but it worsened by the day. He hated knowing the suffering would last another two years.

A thousand-year-old water spiritual bead could suppress the flame poison, but it was a rare, consumable resource. Bai Zihao had already spent too long looking for one without success. Then the Thousand Poison Sect and Medicine King's Valley felled a water beast in Hidden Moon Lake.

Jin Feiren had been ambiguous toward the Medicine King's Valley all these years. He never thought Yue Wuhuan would seduce the Medicine King and become his personal disciple, or that he could be so heavily favored. He knew what he'd done to Yue Wuhuan and wasn't delusional enough to think the madman had forgiven him. But it didn't matter what Yue Wuhuan thought.

Song Qingshi, though…

Technically, Xie Que was to blame. Golden Phoenix Mountain hadn't violated any of the immortal realm's moral codes by purchasing slaves. No one could really object to Golden Phoenix Mountain's actions. Even if Jin Feiren hadn't purchased Yue Wuhuan, he would've ended up in a brothel. With his beauty, the same fate would have befallen him anywhere.

The Medicine King's brain was a little abnormal. It was hard to predict his actions when he often disregarded common sense.

Jin Feiren didn't want to get involved with the Medicine King's Valley if it wasn't necessary, even though it was tiny, isolated, and it lacked much influence. Song

Qingshi was the immortal realm's number one doctor, though, and he had saved people from many sects. Even if no one sought out his company, they came to him when they were in trouble—and the valley also produced rare and precious medicines. He and the rest of the sect were irreplaceable.

Song Qingshi treated you depending on his mood and your ability to pay, but living was worth the cost.

Elder Niu of Five Mountain Sect had one foot past the Gates of the Netherworld when Song Qingshi pulled him back, so he remained eternally grateful.

Changkong Island's Mistress Lingmiao sang endless praise for Song Qingshi after his elixir of youth restored her fading beauty.

Countless others felt the same.

Yue Wuhuan avoided Golden Phoenix Mountain, for all his madness. If he wanted revenge, he didn't show it.

The Medicine King was a powerful yuanying-level cultivator, imbued at birth with poisonous fire. He'd studied the work of the poison master, Nie Jue. He was a solitary man, and he held his cards close to his chest. It would cost too much to get rid of him, and it would also incur the wrath of that beast from the Thousand Poison Sect.

Moving against the Medicine King's Valley because his old slave posed a potential threat would only embarrass him. It wasn't worth it.

Jin Feiren weighed his options. His injury presented a perfect opportunity to investigate the valley.

As a show of goodwill, he sent Bai Zihao to acquire the bead, laden with gifts. He wanted to test the waters.

Yue Wuhuan arrived with the setting sun, its light red as blood. He wore a golden, winged mask and robes made of crimson brocade. His beautiful eyes and upright posture were as regal as a phoenix. He was much more beautiful than he had ever looked on Golden Phoenix Mountain.

Bai Zihao was nearly dazzled by the sight. He wanted to greet him, to catch up, but words failed him.

Before he was sold to Golden Phoenix Mountain, Bai Zihao had led a simple life in a simple village. He never knew men could submit to other men. But Jin Feiren had liked him and forced him to learn how to please them. A shocking sight met him on arrival: Yue Wuhuan in the middle of, well…

The inexperienced Bai Zihao had been terrified. He'd cried and longed for escape, but it was impossible. Forced to witness his own future, he nearly fell into despair.

Then, Yue Wuhuan looked up at him from the depths of hell and smiled at him. Bai Zihao didn't know *why*, but he was entranced.

He'd never seen someone so beautiful. Yue Wuhuan was like a sinful flower growing from piles of bleached, crumbling bone in the depths of the abyss. His bewitching beauty drove the world's filth away; his perfection commanded total attention. Bai Zihao knew he shouldn't look, but he couldn't avert his eyes. Something was wrong with him. He felt strange.

Later, he realized that he'd felt desire. He'd desired another man.

The lock in his heart cracked just a sliver, and some of his self-respect chipped away.

When Jin Feiren next kissed Bai Zihao, he didn't struggle. He tried to accept his situation.

Yet Yue Wuhuan's haunting smile appeared in Bai Zihao's mind whenever he was in pain. Such a beautiful soul had fallen into hell. What would his own weak struggles amount to?

He saw Yue Wuhuan again a few days later.

Yue Wuhuan had somehow angered Jin Feiren, earning him not only a whipping but also three days without food in a dark cell. Slaves desperately avoided the dungeon.

It was dark and damp, frightful and cramped. Their wounds festered. Mice scurried everywhere. Staying there was unbearable torture.

Bai Zihao wanted to help Yue Wuhuan, so he brought food and medicine in secret. The guards knew Jin Feiren favored him, so it was easy to bribe them into turning a blind eye to his actions.

He managed the rest of the dungeon without trouble and found Yue Wuhuan curled on a cold stone bed. His hair hung in limp curtains, and blood stained his red mermaid-silk robes. He looked unbelievably filthy, but somehow content. He hummed a familiar little tune, the kind everyone's mother sang for her child at bedtime.

At Bai Zihao's entrance, Yue Wuhuan sat up in surprise.

Bai Zihao silently ferried the food and medicine into his cell. He wanted to say something, but he was at a loss for words.

Yue Wuhuan regarded the things he'd brought with an air of amusement.

"Stupid," he said, breathless with laughter.

Bai Zihao didn't understand what he'd done wrong.

"I've seen so many people like you. Compassionate toward everyone. How hilarious. You'd better hurry and learn how to please that man with your body. Your looks are just to his taste, and you're soft. If you're obedient, you'll suffer a lot less. Don't worry. You look suited to this kind of thing," Yue Wuhuan said. He rolled the tiny bottle of medicine Bai Zihao had brought him back and forth between his fingers. "Didn't you react to me the other day? What was that, exactly? Let me guess, you have certain feelings about submitting?"

He'd uncovered Bai Zihao's secret, shredded his dignity without mercy, and ground them both into the dirt.

Blood rushed to Bai Zihao's face as he stood up.

"Why don't you know what's good for you?!"

"I don't need these." Yue Wuhuan threw the food and medicine back at him. "*You* should save them. You'll need all the help you can get after servicing that man."

Bai Zihao fled the dungeon, humiliated. What a hateful creature!

Yue Wuhuan gave a cold look at his retreating back, then lay back down. He didn't speak again.

Their third meeting took place on Langgan Stage, after the tiger yao rushed Yue Wuhuan and the Medicine King saved him. Bai Zihao had been scared witless by the attack, but he'd sighed in relief when he saw Yue Wuhuan being led away.

That night, Bai Zihao became Jin Feiren's personal toy, and he learned to his horror that everything Yue Wuhuan had said was true.

Despite Jin Feiren's brutal treatment, Bai Zihao still felt pleasure. Slowly, he began to lose his resistance—to submit. Jin Feiren was a proud, arrogant man. He liked to conquer the heart, not just the body. Little by little, Bai Zihao lost himself as he learned to please. As long as he obeyed, no, *worshipped* Jin Feiren, his life was easier.

So he did just that. He treated Jin Feiren like his sun, his moon, and all his stars, and Jin Feiren rewarded him with his highest favor.

When the Crazy Daoist attacked Jin Feiren, Bai Zihao blocked the fatal blow.

At that moment, Jin Feiren fell in love. He freed Bai Zihao, granted him significant privileges, and showered him with precious resources to aid his cultivation. Bai Zihao only serviced him, and he rarely suffered punishment. He was permitted to study with the other disciples. Jin Feiren made significant concessions for Bai Zihao when he negotiated with Pine Crane Sect.

Bai Zihao told himself this was what love and happiness felt like.

Despite everything, he couldn't forget what happened to Yue Wuhuan.

Now that Jin Feiren trusted him, Bai Zihao started to quietly research Yue Wuhuan. The more he learned, the less he understood. Yue Wuhuan had Jin Feiren's favor when he first arrived at Golden Phoenix Mountain. If he wanted a good life, he only needed to serve Jin Feiren. How had he fallen so far? How had he ended up as the lowliest of slaves, forced to serve anyone who wanted him, when he was so beautiful?

Bai Zihao didn't understand, but he couldn't stop thinking about it.

One day, after he woke up covered in injuries from the night before, he suddenly understood.

That was Yue Wuhuan's rebellion against Jin Feiren.

He wouldn't bend, even if he had to serve countless guests through humiliation and torture. He'd never relinquish his heart! He'd rather be a pitiful vessel whom anyone could use than belong to that man!

He was the thorn in Jin Feiren's heart.

Jin Feiren never spoke his name, but for a long time, he kept trying to find another youth just like Yue Wuhuan.

Bai Zihao wasn't jealous. Instead, he admired Yue Wuhuan—because *he* could never do the same.

He heard later that Yue Wuhuan had earned the Medicine King's favor and become his disciple. He lived well, it seemed, even after he was disfigured and went mad. He was scarred and broken, but he was still free.

The other slaves disdained Yue Wuhuan for his beauty and how he held himself differently. They mocked him for stupidity, for losing Jin Feiren's favor, for spoiling his own chance at an easy life.

Bai Zihao never participated in those discussions. He had a small world. It was just him, and Jin Feiren.

From his glorious cage, the white bird admired the freedom to fly.

His master could never find out.

Yue Wuhuan offered the bead to Bai Zihao, smiling. "Take this with you. You've done your part."

Bai Zihao accepted the brocade box with profuse thanks. His heart settled back down into his chest.

“No need to thank me.” Yue Wuhuan chuckled. “I heard you’re about to become Master Jin’s life partner. Congratulations in advance. Zunzhu doesn’t like parties, but we’ll send a gift. What kind of things do you like?”

Bai Zihao blushed. “There’s no need for such formalities.”

“I insist. I knew you were a good one when I met you, all those years ago.” Yue Wuhuan glanced at the bruises on Bai Zihao’s neck. “You rein in Master Jin. That’s nice, isn’t it? He must love you from the bottom of his heart.”

Bai Zihao pulled his collar a little tighter around his neck. “Well, I do too.”

“You’re made for each other,” Yue Wuhuan said sincerely.

“Thank you.” Bai Zihao stared at his mask a long while before he let himself ask. “About your face—”

“It’s nothing serious.” Yue Wuhuan took off his mask, revealing the ugly spots. “The Medicine King’s Valley is full of toxic fauna. I got unlucky and ran across a particularly potent ghost snake. I missed the period for treatment because Zunzhu was in isolation, so I’m stuck like this.”

Bai Zihao reeled back in shock. It took him a while to collect himself. “Stuck like this… Doesn’t that change how the Medicine King feels?” At Golden Phoenix Mountain, everyone said Yue Wuhuan had gotten the Medicine King’s attention through his beauty and body. Since he’d lost one, wouldn’t the Medicine King cast him aside?

Yue Wuhuan returned the mask to his face. “Zunzhu doesn’t mind.”

“Oh, well. He’s a good man then.” Bai Zihao was relieved; he wouldn’t call the Medicine King weird ever again. At the very least, he was kind and faithful.

Yue Wuhuan knew Bai Zihao had a malleable heart. He’d been locked away in Golden Phoenix Mountain for many years. He’d had no contact with the outside world. He conducted himself by their standards, and he lived by Jin Feiren’s words. He could no longer see things like a normal person. That wasn’t new. Most of the slaves at Golden Phoenix Mountain had warped perspectives.

But Yue Wuhuan had come to ask something else.

At the time of Song Qingshi's visit to Golden Phoenix Mountain, little concerned Yue Wuhuan but his own impending death on Langgan Stage. But Bai Zihao had been present at Jin Feiren's side. He would know…

"Did Master Jin invite him?" he asked, after describing his suspect to Bai Zihao.

"Hmm. Yes, he did. But Master was terribly unhappy that he left without saying goodbye. He complained about it for ages afterward."

Yue Wuhuan smiled, satisfied. He wished the two of them a long, loving life, then left.

Bai Zihao took a deep breath and secured the bead before he went back inside. Then he saw the Medicine King leap out of a tree as he passed by a window.

Song Qingshi gave Yue Wuhuan a worried once-over, as if Yue Wuhuan had just come from a dangerous battlefield, not a conversation.

The Medicine King really did adore him.

Bai Zihao shook his head and smiled. He was just about to close the window when the Medicine King flipped one of Yue Wuhuan's sleeves open. He'd found something after all. Yue Wuhuan tried to pull away, but the Medicine King wouldn't allow it.

What happened? Curious, Bai Zihao expanded his spiritual senses and spied on them.

There was a small cut on Yue Wuhuan's wrist. It wasn't serious, just a little thing. It was already starting to heal.

"Zunzhu, that was an accident. It's fine…"

"If there was blood, you should disinfect it just in case," Song Qingshi insisted. He produced a jar of ointment from his interspatial pouch. He bent and carefully applied it for Yue Wuhuan, then wrapped it with gauze. He moved with caution, as though he feared hurting his patient.

"Be careful!" he warned Yue Wuhuan. "Don't get injured. It'll hurt…"

Bai Zihao stared. Song Qingshi had his head down; Yue Wuhuan couldn't see the immeasurable sadness filling those clear eyes. How could a trivial discomfort pain him so? Why?

Bai Zihao's heart squeezed like it was in a vise grip. He wasn't sure what he knew anymore—everything inside him had fallen into chaos.

Eventually, he left the little town and started on his journey back to Golden Phoenix Mountain.

Jin Feiren suppressed the flame poison with the water bead. He carried Bai Zihao to bed and rewarded him the same way he always had—frenzied, violent, painful, pleasurable.

"I love you, I love you the most," he swore, again and again. Bai Zihao stared at the canopy over their bed.

He had never permitted himself to wonder: *If you love me, how can you stand hurting me?*

A tear rolled down his cheek and onto the pillow, where it disappeared.

Chapter 53

YUE WUHUAN NOTICED that his teacher seemed needier than before. Song Qingshi accompanied him everywhere, trying to make conversation on the day's weather, peonies in the garden, birds in flight, or delicious food. Perhaps his secret research project about building relationships between teacher and disciple had something to do with it?

He questioned Yanyuan-xianjun with a *tiny* bit of force. Rather than refuse a madman, Yanyuan-xianjun folded right away.

Yue Wuhuan thought playing his teacher's obedient disciple sounded like a great time, but Song Qingshi wasn't a very good scene partner. No matter the topic, their conversations ended within three exchanges. Yue Wuhuan didn't mind. It was too cute, watching Song Qingshi rack his brain for things to say to him. Sometimes Yue Wuhuan broke the silence with a new topic when Song Qingshi really got himself stuck at a dead end.

One night, Song Qingshi climbed into Yue Wuhuan's bed again. He settled against his pillow with a copy of *The Collected Myths of Kang*.

"Let's read a bedtime story," Song Qingshi said seriously.

Yue Wuhuan lay on his own pillow, listening as Song Qingshi narrated a fable about a fearsome tiger and a little white rabbit. It was almost like he was in a dream, transported back to his childhood. His mother may as well have been chattering softly beside him…

"I seem to have grabbed the wrong book," Song Qingshi concluded after reading a few pages.

He had casually grabbed the Red Dragon disciples' recent favorite bedtime story. The title hadn't presented any issues, and it apparently imparted lessons in morality, judgment, and beauty. He hadn't vetted the contents, assuming they could read it together

and grow closer. What could go wrong? Unfortunately, the story catered to a certain kind of reader. After all, the Red Dragon Sect had many young disciples.

Children's stories usually had good morals, at least. He kind of wanted to know how the little white rabbit would defeat the tiger.

Song Qingshi read habitually, and he didn't like giving up on a book halfway through. He gritted his teeth and finished the story.

Yue Wuhuan buried his head under the covers, trying his hardest not to giggle.

"I'll get a different book tomorrow." Although Song Qingshi was embarrassed by his stupid mistake, it was fine if it made Yue Wuhuan happy.

Yue Wuhuan laughed for ages before he surfaced from the blankets. He wondered what Song Qingshi would do next.

"Since you're not tired, shall we solve a few advanced math problems?" Song Qingshi suggested, grasping at straws.

"Sure." Yue Wuhuan's smile grew. "I love doing things in bed with you, Zunzhu."

His happiness delighted Song Qingshi. He brought out a brush and paper, wrote down twenty questions in one go, and introduced some new formulas. Yue Wuhuan applied himself wholeheartedly. Once he came to, he discovered that Song Qingshi had fallen asleep, unguarded beside him.

Too tempting. The bloodking vines fanned out, surrounding Song Qingshi like a huge web. They prodded at their captive prey. Yue Wuhuan greedily drank in the sight of his long-coveted treasure. He restrained himself and his desires, too, by leaving a single vine coiled around Song Qingshi's ankle.

He didn't need to rush.

Song Qingshi reviewed all the bedtime stories he knew the next day. *Snow White* and *The Ugly Duckling* weren't appropriate entertainment for Yue Wuhuan, but neither were mathematical problems. Yue Wuhuan had more enthusiasm for learning than even

Song Qingshi. He strayed further from sleep with every answer, and he'd stay awake even if Song Qingshi drifted off.

He renewed his dedication to finding a novel suitable for adults. Yue Wuhuan had already shared his well-developed thoughts on reading *The Three Tiger-Fighting Brothers.* Their next bedtime story had to be *really* interesting.

Song Qingshi gave it ample thought, and took advantage of Yue Wuhuan studying talismans with the Red Dragon Sect disciples to find the right book. But sect libraries were private, exclusive places. One required permission to enter. Song Qingshi followed the rules, so he sought Yanyuan-xianjun's permission. Unexpectedly, he ran into Niannian instead.

Niannian was a little scamp who grew close to everyone easily.

Over and over again, Yanyuan-xianjun had reminded his disciples that the Medicine King was eccentric and not to be trifled with. But Niannian harbored some doubts. She thought the cultivator who saved her had a good temper. Contrary to rumor, he was far from cruel, and when he was with Yue Wuhuan, he seemed incredibly gentle. She liked the "older brother" type, and Song Qingshi fit the bill.

Niannian greeted Song Qingshi, then asked him what he was looking for.

"Do you know any bedtime stories suitable for adults?" he asked Niannian. He felt at ease, speaking to such a sunny little girl. "Like novels. The kind your shixiong and shijie stay up reading. Can you borrow some for me?"

"I *do*." Niannian understood at once. "Lan-shijie has tons. She reads them every night. The other shijie are always trying to borrow from her. She's so generous, she lets them take whatever they like. Recently, though, she's kind of acting weird. I think Shifu scolded her for slacking off? She hid all her books… But I know where she put them. Wait for me, and I'll sneak a couple for you."

Song Qingshi showered her with thanks, returned to his room, and made a pot of tea, ready to look through the books.

Soon, Niannian ran in, laden with novels. She excitedly handed them to Song Qingshi, then left as quickly as she came.

Song Qingshi took a sip of his tea and cracked open the first book, *Joyful Imprisonment*. The main character's job and name weren't too different from his. Jingshi was also a yuanying cultivator who had mastered both medicine and poison. He had captured a mortal beauty called Yuehuan, and the novel opened with a passionate kissing scene*: Jingshi pressed Yuehuan forcefully into a stone wall and kissed his crimson lips. On their mingled breath, they tasted a honeyed sweetness that surpassed all mortal passions…*

He sipped on his tea. Something seemed wrong here. He pondered it for a while. His thoughts slammed to a halt.

Was this secretly about him and Yue Wuhuan?

When had he ever done such shameless things to Yue Wuhuan?

Song Qingshi rifled through the pages. This book was *very inappropriate*, hardcore, and NSFW! It had him and a beauty performing acts that should've been censored by publishers, enough to make a grown man blush. Startled, he dashed the book against the ground. Then he picked up another—just to take a look. Here, the sensuous stunner tempted him into a passionate entanglement instead. In the third book, he trussed up the head-turner and tormented him in the weirdest places.

Their names might change by a character or two, but they were clearly intended to portray him and Yue Wuhuan.

Song Qingshi sat there, entirely frozen solid. He didn't know he was such a beast in these people's eyes!

The door opened, and Yue Wuhuan walked in. His brow furrowed at the sight of the books on the table.

It was too late to burn them.

He could've wept as he stumbled over his words. "W-Wuhuan! I can explain. I didn't know, I mean, I-I didn't do anything…"

“Oh, I know about these.” Yue Wuhuan picked up a book, gave the cover a once-over, and flipped through a few pages. He sighed. “People are curious. My reputation is too well-known, and it’s affected yours.”

Song Qingshi’s confused expression said he didn’t understand.

“It’s my unsavory past,” Yue Wuhuan said with a bitter laugh. “They assume I won you over *physically*. That’s why they’ve written these indecent stories. Everyone knows it’s nonsense. Other famous figures have stories written about them as well. Zunzhu, don’t take it seriously.”

Bookstores didn’t make massive profits in the immortal realm, so the owners of these businesses were mostly nobodies afraid to cross a madman. Yue Wuhuan had burned a *lot* of books and dealt with a *lot* of bookstore owners. That meant the towns near the Medicine King’s Valley were too afraid to sell such obscenity out in the open, but ones written under a pseudonym were still common. They were all lesser-known authors who needed only add a disclaimer asserting the story bore no relation to real people or events. The immortal realm laughed the existence of the books off. No one took them for truth, so no one needed to verify their contents. Plenty of readers just purchased them for fun.

Song Qingshi never read novels, never mind erotic ones. He hadn’t even considered the possibility. Yue Wuhuan’s explanation clarified things, but it still bothered him.

He’d never lusted after Yue Wuhuan or done anything untoward with him. He cultivated emptiness. He didn’t have desires. He’d never toed the line, man or woman. He’d never even touched himself! If they wrote about him in a relationship, fine. But why did they have to make him a sex-crazed maniac?

Tongues intertwining, a honeyed sweetness…

Was it really as delicious as they said?

Song Qingshi looked up at Yue Wuhuan’s beautiful, vibrant lips. For some reason, words from the book rose in his mind, followed by vulgar images of Yue Wuhuan.

Song Qingshi started and shook his head back and forth to dislodge them. He couldn't think about such things!

Yue Wuhuan gathered the pile of books for Yanyuan-xianjun dispose of. Then he reconsidered and sat down across from Song Qingshi.

"Zunzhu, everything in these books is exaggerated. They're having a good time imagining these things between men, even though they're not true. This is a very disgusting act."

Song Qingshi sat up ramrod straight, like Yue Wuhuan had just caught him doing something wrong.

"Men's bodies are different from women's. We're not suited for this kind of thing," Yue Wuhuan said, his voice heavy. "It's much more painful than you imagine, and it crushes your dignity, bit by bit. It's terrible. Once, there was a slave…"

Yue Wuhuan's descriptions sounded like hellish torture, even though he tried to keep his distance by using medical terms. His own experiences made him very convincing.

Song Qingshi's face paled. He felt queasy.

He'd thought some internal tearing was the worst of it, but what Yue Wuhuan described was both more terrifying and revolting than he'd imagined.

"Don't try it. Not even if you're curious."

The fear on Song Qingshi's face satisfied Yue Wuhuan. He brushed away some of Song Qingshi's stray hairs and pulled him into his embrace. "Stay as you are now, Zunzhu. Don't think about those things, all right? My heart would break if you got hurt."

There was so much filth in the world. If Yue Wuhuan dropped his guard for even a moment, someone might take advantage of that.

What if they took Song Qingshi away? The idea filled Yue Wuhuan with hate.

Yue Wuhuan's cheerful, relaxed gaze disquieted Song Qingshi. Yue Wuhuan hadn't lied; everything he'd described, he'd also experienced. How could he look so calm after he'd ripped open old wounds without flinching? Why did his expression seem contradictory? He'd suppressed his emotions until they jumbled, his sorrow somehow mimicking joy. He didn't seem aware that he was only showing others what they wanted to see.

Song Qingshi had other worries too. He'd found residual traces of the poison puppets on the deer the farmer had scavenged several days ago, and more of them in the grass at the foot of the mountain. Poison puppets only existed to kill. They stayed in interspatial bags as a precaution. Why take them out, otherwise? And the cuts on Yue Wuhuan's wrists… He was a famous doctor. How could he fail to discern self-inflicted wounds from accidental ones?

After he noticed these things, he'd done his best to stay with Yue Wuhuan and get him talking. He wanted to know exactly what was going on. Now, he had something of an answer: Yue Wuhuan's mental condition had worsened.

Song Qingshi became lost in thought.

"What is it, Zunzhu?" Yue Wuhuan chuckled at the look on his face.

"All right," Song Qingshi said, refocusing on Yue Wuhuan. "I won't do anything Wuhuan doesn't like. I won't even think about it," he promised.

"Thank you, Zunzhu. You're the best." Yue Wuhuan sounded satisfied.

"But…what is it you *would* like me to do?"

"I want you to raise little white mice with me. Do experiments with me. Study with me. Watch clouds with me too."

Song Qingshi nodded. "I will."

He returned to his own room that evening, without an excuse for climbing into bed with Yue Wuhuan. A bloodking vine inched toward him. After a long contemplation, he took a deep breath, picked it up, and wrapped it around his own ankle.

Chapter 54

ALMOST ALL THE DISCIPLES of the Red Dragon Sect knelt in the ancestral hall. Niannian sobbed uncontrollably over her battered palms, red from her teacher's strikes.

Yanyuan-xianjun swore to correct his disciples, rectify their mistakes, and instill some moral lessons. He had burned the offending texts.

That satisfied Song Qingshi. He had Yue Wuhuan gift Niannian a set of math textbooks, and he said he would send more math problems via pigeon every few days so she could improve her studies. He also promised to pepper her with pop quizzes to check her grades. That way, she would advance far in her talisman career.

Yanyuan-xianjun relayed his thanks over and over. Lan-shijie and company also promised to help the Medicine King monitor their studies. Those kids would stay on the straight and narrow.

Niannian cried even harder. Her teacher was right. The Medicine King's gentle facade *was* all a sham. He was a violent, evil man. She'd never dream of marrying such a man ever again. How scary! Yue Wuhuan was the better option. He had such a warm smile, and he'd even tried to convince Yanyuan-xianjun not to rush things. Where was the hurry? Kids should take their time learning. He'd pick out some simple textbooks for her so that she could enjoy her youth.

She thought it would be better to marry someone like Yue Wuhuan when she grew up.

Song Qingshi's checkup confirmed Yanyuan-xianjun didn't have any major issues. He prepared to leave, but Yue Wuhuan was a little worried.

"What about An-dage? He said he was craving alcohol, but he never showed up in town. What's he gotten up to?"

"No good, probably." Song Qingshi chuckled. "It's all right. He's not a child. And he's really good at tracking spells. He'll find us if he needs to. He's always messing around. He's run off halfway through a trip before. It's so annoying. Most of the

time I just leave him behind. Don't worry! If he gets into trouble, he'll message us begging for help."

Yue Wuhuan resigned himself to disappointment.

They rode on horseback to South Sea City. The weather there felt like spring year-round, and the city was in full bloom. The Flower Festival had already started, turning the entire city into a kingdom of flowers. Every house was decorated with colorful blossoms, and their perfume filled the air. Restaurants served floral delicacies, and groups of young, playful men and women tucked flowers into each other's hair. Even grannies couldn't resist pinning a few small, fragrant white florets on their chests.

Song Qingshi enjoyed the novelty. He had never participated in the Flower Festival. He explained the local culture and customs to Yue Wuhuan, glancing at the cheat sheet secreted in his sleeve.

Yue Wuhuan interrupted his recital. "Zunzhu, I've been here, actually."

"What? When?"

Song Qingshi had the answer as soon as the question left his lips. He kept forgetting he'd been unconscious for a decade. Of the last ten years, he only remembered Yue Wuhuan's arrival at the valley; he had witnessed none of the developments since. Yue Wuhuan had done what he hadn't, gone where he couldn't, while he clung to the past.

How stupid of him.

"I rarely go out," Song Qingshi said, then he smiled. "Show me around, Wuhuan?"

During the festival, visitors to South Sea City had to squeeze through dense crowds. The streets were filled to the brim. Every stall on the road drew his eyes to new and exciting things, but he couldn't create a path with either of his fires or poison, in case it harmed anyone. Time and time again, he was pulled into the sea of people and lost Yue Wuhuan.

Even with his vines, Yue Wuhuan couldn't just grab Song Qingshi out of the crowd. He bore with it the first few times, but the next time a fruit peddler stopped Song Qingshi hoping to capitalize on his apparent youth, Yue Wuhuan grabbed his arm and dragged him away.

"There're too many people. Don't wander off."

Song Qingshi offered him one of the two blue fruits he'd just purchased. "Want some?"

"That's not ripe. It'll be too sour." Yue Wuhuan grabbed the fruit. "If you want to try it, I'll macerate it with some sugar first."

He'd just finished speaking when Song Qingshi polished the rind and took a bite. Yue Wuhuan didn't have time to stop him.

"That's dirty."

Song Qingshi considered the taste. "I think it's sour. It's pretty good."

"It's definitely sour," Yue Wuhuan said, exasperated.

"I'm kidding." Song Qingshi tossed it aside with a little laugh. "It *is* quite sour."

The sun had nearly reached its peak. Yue Wuhuan dragged Song Qingshi into a neat-looking teahouse and found a window seat. He took out the tea set he'd packed and wiped it a few times, before he tossed a spiritual crystal to the waiter with a request for clean flower petals. He brewed a pot of tea himself, paired it with homemade cakes, and presented these to Song Qingshi. He had done so the whole trip, whenever permitted.

Song Qingshi accepted graciously. Yue Wuhuan was always this particular about cleanliness. The couple seated next to them hurried to leave. He surveyed the other guests and noticed that all the cultivators had averted their eyes. They seemed afraid to look at them. Only few curious mortals glanced at Yue Wuhuan's exquisite mask.

Such fear and avoidance seemed normal when An Long had been with them. The malamute looked tough, after all. But he wasn't there now, and everyone was avoiding them anyway.

The Medicine King had a fierce reputation, but he rarely left the valley, so few people knew him. They'd encountered no such scene when he took Yue Wuhuan to Yue City—and this was his first time in South Sea City, so he couldn't have left a bad impression already.

Were all these people afraid of Yue Wuhuan?

What had he done?

Song Qingshi's expression grew serious.

Yue Wuhuan glanced around. He understood Song Qingshi's confusion.

"Sea merchants come to every Flower Festival," he explained pleasantly. "Ye Lin told me I could find blue tallow here."

Song Qingshi nodded. Yue Wuhuan wanted it for him. Blue tallow was an extremely rare medicine used for paralyzed limbs.

"After I spent a hefty sum on the blue tallow, some people with ill intentions set their sights on me." Yue Wuhuan sounded a little aggrieved. "Seeing as I was just a foundation-level cultivator, they thought they could steal what I'd bought. I had no choice but to kill them. Perhaps the method seemed…extreme."

He'd only turned the tables at the end—trapped them, controlled them with puppet incense, and used them to test his improved drunken-bone poison. After it proved effective, he'd strung them up from the city gates with his vines as a warning to others.

People recognized him, right? So he'd gone a little overboard. He wouldn't have taken it so far had he known Song Qingshi would come here, eventually—or he would've made the effort to cover it up.

Yue Wuhuan thought back on it regretfully. "Zunzhu, was I wrong?"

"You weren't wrong," Song Qingshi said. "That's exactly how you deal with bad apples: quickly and decisively!"

"I'll remember that for next time." Yue Wuhuan changed the subject. "Zunzhu, the Flower Festival offers plenty of fun. A flower cart should pass by in four hours if we

stay here. The girls in South Sea City are famously beautiful. Every year, they put the prettiest one on the cart as a mythological character. Lots of famous artists gather to paint her. I was in too much of a rush and didn't get to see it last time. It was a shame."

He regretted not finding that damned painter even more.

Song Qingshi was curious. He pressed himself against the windowsill and watched the commotion outside.

He waited a long, long time before the flower cart made its way over. When it came, a pair of twins were perched atop it. The first twin was so beautiful she shamed the blossoms surrounding her, while the other was so breathtaking fish forgot to swim when they saw her. Their delicate hair ornaments and gorgeous feathered robes swayed as they went by. They were playing phoenixes, covered from head to toe in gold, pearls, and jade. A floating array kept them suspended over the cart's flame flowers. They flourished their long, trailing water sleeves like wings and began to dance as beautifully as birds in flight.

The mesmerized audience swarmed the twins, showering them with handfuls of gold, pearls, and spiritual crystals.

The teahouse Yue Wuhuan had picked was a little far from the cart, so it was hard to see. Song Qingshi expanded his spiritual senses to the surrounding dragonflies and butterflies. They circled the cart, so he could examine everything and everyone nearby in perfect detail.

Yue Wuhuan leaned in closer. He endured Song Qingshi's wandering eyes, but he wasn't happy with it. The vines crept up Song Qingshi's leg and squeezed in a fit of pique.

"Zunzhu, are they pretty?" Yue Wuhuan asked against his ear. There was a whine in the question.

"Yes," Song Qingshi said, "but not as pretty as you."

That pair of sisters could dress as phoenixes, but his Yue Wuhuan was the real thing. He needed no embellishment.

Yue Wuhuan asked happily, “Then…how about you stop looking at them and only look at me?”

Song Qingshi sat back down and fixed his eyes on Yue Wuhuan. “All right.”

His teacher was too obedient. He never disappointed Yue Wuhuan, complying with every request. But Yue Wuhuan felt strangely agitated. This wasn’t a good place to travel. It was disgusting, actually, and full of lowlifes. He had better hurry up, deal with the trouble, and take Song Qingshi home.

They stared at each other in silence, savoring their tea.

They had some time before dusk, but Yue Wuhuan insisted on returning to their inn. He claimed that all the hustle and bustle of traveling had interfered with his sleep. He felt too tired to do anything but read in his room. Song Qingshi accompanied him to bed and stumbled through a bizarre story he called *Little Red Riding Hood*. They balanced a few equations, but Yue Wuhuan still didn’t seem sleepy afterward, so Song Qingshi made him a cup of calming tea. Yue Wuhuan couldn’t refuse. He had no choice but to drink it.

Song Qingshi brewed *extremely* calming tea. Yue Wuhuan wanted to stay up a little longer, but he fought to keep his eyes open. Slowly, surely, he succumbed to drowsiness and dreams.

In the dream, he was a large, gray wolf. Song Qingshi was his prisoner, tied up in a little wooden hut, and Yue Wuhuan wouldn’t stop doing horrible things to him.

Song Qingshi cried and begged for mercy, begged for him to stop…

But Yue Wuhuan wouldn’t stop, no matter what.

In the end, he forced himself awake from the dream. The evidence of his pleasure pained him. He longed to scratch himself bloody or whip himself with his vines. But Song Qingshi would find out. He shoved his worst urges down and pinched a few red marks in his palm instead. Slowly, his breathing calmed.

The bloodking vines writhed around him, and he suddenly noticed the scent of calming incense in the air.

Something was missing.

There was no one in the room next door. The vine wrapped around Song Qingshi's ankle had gone slack. Where was he?

Had he run off? Had he disappeared?

Yue Wuhuan's chest heaved. A flood of terror washed over him. He threw on some clothes haphazardly, donned his mask, and rushed out of the room in a frenzy.

He couldn't lose his treasure—his one reason for living.

The moonlight was as silent as water.

An artist moved his brush, conjuring the beautiful phoenix sisters on his scroll. Their pure faces had been transformed into temptresses that could steal the soul.

Someone tapped on the window behind him.

He turned around and saw a bright-eyed young man sitting on the windowsill, swathed in layers of snow-white robes. He must have watched silently for some time, absorbed in the process.

Had he come to ask for a painting? Of what?

The artist appraised the boy's looks. He seemed scrawny, and he wasn't a stunning beauty, but he had a brisk air about him. His skin was pale and clear. If he slipped that beautiful robe off his shoulders, showed a little skin, and feigned having forbidden desires, it might inspire him to create something.

Song Qingshi squirmed under his gaze and pulled his robes tighter around himself.

"Excuse me," he said cautiously. "Did you design the prints for *Beauties of the Golden Age*?"

"Yes." The artist was overjoyed. His greatest triumph!

"Good. I've looked for you for a long time," Song Qingshi said, sighing in relief. He'd used the dragonflies and butterflies to circle the cart several times, and had

noticed there was an artist whose style was similar to the man he was looking for. His nerves had kept him from telling Yue Wuhuan, in case he'd gotten it wrong.

He had come to make certain. “I never thought I’d find you here. Do you enjoy painting such things?”

“Of course!” The painter laughed. “Don’t be shy. Should I make one for you?”

Song Qingshi lowered his head, smiling shyly. A beautiful black lotus unfurled in his hand, petal by petal.

Those who painted scenes from hell should return from whence they came.

Chapter 55

SONG QINGSHI STOOD OUTSIDE the wine shop and listened to the owner hawking his wares.

"Who could come to the Flower Festival and not sample the petals' nectar? Please don't misunderstand me, my dear customer. I mean flower wine, of course!" The owner expected a reaction to his very male joke, but Song Qingshi's expression stayed flat as a board. He didn't laugh at all—maybe he just didn't get it. The owner changed his tune. "We grow flowers here in South Sea City, and this delicious wine is brewed from eight different varieties. It's called Drunken Beauty. It's sweet, flavorful, and we only sell it during the festival. Supplies are limited! Once it's gone, it's gone for good."

Sweet? Exclusive? Most men couldn't resist a limited edition.

Song Qingshi pulled out his spiritual crystals and bought a jar right away. He wanted to return to the inn as soon as possible, now that he had finished dealing with the artist, but so much of South Sea City looked alike *and* everything was covered in flowers. He had accidentally made a wrong turn somehow, lost in thought, and ended up at the night market.

The Flower Festival night market was flourishing. Between the opera performances to his left and the dancing monkeys to his right, there were so many things Song Qingshi had never seen before.

Was the night life in South Sea City always like this?

Song Qingshi couldn't restrain his curiosity. He might never experience this again, once he returned to the Medicine King's Valley. He only meant to have a little peek, but he caved to every sales pitch and purchased a cavalcade of stuff: glimmering gems, sumptuous scarlet fabric, a book about Mo Yuan's exploits, and a little figurine of a phoenix made from dough.

All the visitors to the night market seemed to have paired off, for some reason. They strolled and laughed, hands clasped.

Song Qingshi asked the wine seller why.

He laughed. “You didn’t know? Our Flower Festival is also called the Lovers’ Festival.”

Song Qingshi shook his head. He hadn’t encountered that in any of his research. Night Rain Pavilion was really starting to slack off. Once he got back, he’d have to scold Ye Lin on his lack of professionalism.

“It’s an old custom. Everyone enjoys the day’s festivities, but nighttime belongs to the couples. This city never sleeps. If you don’t have a partner, just find one. It won’t be hard, with your good looks. Want some introductions?” the owner suggested warmly. “If you enjoy this Drunken Beauty with a beauty of your own, you’ll feel the sweetness down to your bones!”

When Song Qingshi heard that, Yue Wuhuan’s face came to the forefront of his mind.

“No thank you,” he sputtered. “I have a beauty. I mean a beautiful partner. Uh, n-not the kind of partner you mean.”

Whenever he panicked, he started speaking nonsense.

The shopkeeper’s confusion grew. “What kind of partner? Male? Female?” He leaned in, hoping to hear better. A tangle of bloodred vines fell from the ceiling before he finished speaking, and hit the ground with such explosive force both men staggered back.

Yue Wuhuan stood astride the roof’s peak, his dark, inky hair tossing in the wind. The tie at his waist hung open, and the collar of his inner robe was flipped outward. What remained of his neat, polite demeanor had been marred, like the creased hem of his red cotton robe. Under his gold, feathered mask, his phoenix eyes blazed with uncontrolled madness. He tightened his lush mouth as if to smile, like always, but the corners of his lips pulled too far—into a grimace.

Bloodking vines sprawled over the ground, sprouting dense thickets of leafy branches. The entire population of South Sea City had witnessed those vines on the city

gates and learned to fear them.

The wine seller landed on his rear and crawled back, fleeing as far as seemed possible.

“It’s all right,” Song Qingshi said, cradling the wine jar in his arms. But his reassurances fell on deaf ears. Everyone fled.

A swarm of bloodking vines rose up and wrapped around his torso and then his limbs, interlacing swiftly. Layer after layer of vine restrained him in furious cobwebs, like a spider fearful its prey would escape.

Song Qingshi summoned his spiritual fire instinctively, before he remembered that the vines connected to Yue Wuhuan’s soul. Burning a single sprout would hurt him. He yanked the flame away and allowed the vines to lift him into the air. They deposited him in Yue Wuhuan’s arms like an offering.

“Zunzhu.” Yue Wuhuan lowered his head and mouthed Song Qingshi’s neck, breathing in his scent. He moved upward, and his tongue swept over Song Qingshi’s sensitive earlobe as though he savored the taste, but he sounded quite pitiful. “I couldn’t find you when I woke up. I was so worried.”

“I just went to run a few errands,” Song Qingshi said earnestly. “I wanted to pick up a few things before heading home.”

The vines tensed around him, tighter and tighter. They piled on as though they wanted to obscure the outside world with their sheer mass.

“Zunzhu, this place is filthy at night. Don’t run off. Stay with me, okay?”

The more he traveled the world, the more he found it tainted. If he hadn’t been wary of An Long and needed to deal with him, he would never have allowed Song Qingshi to set foot outside of the Medicine King’s Valley. Whether by wandering hands or a nasty fall, anything could happen out here.

Song Qingshi wanted to pat his shoulder in reassurance, but he couldn’t move except to nod.

The night breeze struck Yue Wuhuan. He calmed down, gradually, adjusting his breathing until he realized just what he’d done.

The bloodking vines loosened one by one, releasing Song Qingshi

“Sorry,” Yue Wuhuan apologized, his voice small. His face paled and he trembled all over. “I didn’t mean to.”

Qingluan had once warned him that he felt things to an extreme, so intensely no one else could bear it. She suggested he hold himself back rather than hurt anyone, himself included.

He’d agreed, but only because Song Qingshi might hate him otherwise.

He couldn’t hide anymore.

Yue Wuhuan was terrified.

“It’s okay,” Song Qingshi said kindly, and he shoved his wine jar into Yue Wuhuan’s arms. “It’s my fault. I ran off without letting you know, and you couldn’t find me when you woke up. It’s normal to worry. Don’t be sad. I’m in the wrong.”

When Song Qingshi woke up after ten years, he’d seen Yue Wuhuan wasn’t in danger of hurting himself, and he’d spoken and acted normally. In fact, he was gentler

and more caring than ever before. Song Qingshi assumed that removing the life seal and encouraging Yue Wuhuan to restart his cultivation journey had helped him work on himself mentally and physically. In short, he seemed *recovered*.

At the time, Song Qingshi had also been distracted by his unexpected partial paralysis; he hadn't spared much thought for anything else.

Yue Wuhuan brought him delight after delight. Bewildered as he was by joy, his judgment suffered once again. Then An Long arrived. His injuries worried Song Qingshi, as well as his fight with Yue Wuhuan. He had considered the unpredictable An Long the greater threat, while Yue Wuhuan's calm, sensible behavior obscured his abnormal actions. It had made Song Qingshi feel at ease, which made him miss Yue Wuhuan's aberrance.

Yue Wuhuan was just using subtler means to achieve his goals. He'd never recovered. Once he stopped receiving treatment, his madness thrived. Out of captivity, it grew like a wild beast that could only slake its thirst once it sank its fangs in the world's throat.

How big was it now?

Once Song Qingshi had encountered a snow lotus on a desolate mountain peak with a huge, sprawling root system, complex and entangled. The roots spanned the entire mountainside, several miles. But he could only see the beautiful, pitiful little flower that bloomed in sparkling, clear snow.

Wrong. He'd gotten everything wrong.

He could only admit his mistakes and start over.

"Don't be afraid. I'm here." Song Qingshi pulled the trembling Yue Wuhuan into his arms. Song Qingshi stroked his hair, murmuring over and over, "Don't be afraid. I'll never give up on you…"

Don't be afraid, said the butterfly. *Decide what I eat. Take me anywhere. Keep me by your side. I'll do whatever you want.*

It saw the spider's web and flew in willingly.

Song Qingshi spent a long time comforting Yue Wuhuan before his breathing slowed, and he finally calmed down.

They sat dazed, tucked into their dark, private corner of the roof. Below them, the wine seller thought the villain had left and snuck back to clean up the mess. He called out to customers—perhaps couples liked drinking on occasions such as these?—and soon their playful, teasing banter filled the store again.

Yue Wuhuan saw the Lovers' Festival as a blemish, ruining Song Qingshi's view.

He regretted playing the part of an obedient disciple too well. He should have convinced Song Qingshi to pick a different destination for their trip. How could he have expected Song Qingshi would sneak out, when he loved to stay and read with Yue Wuhuan? Now it was too late to conceal the festival from him. He had to divert his attention, somehow.

Yue Wuhuan relaxed his expression and pointed to the Nine-Tier Pagoda. "Zunzhu, all this moonlit hustle and bustle must be lovely from somewhere high up."

"Yeah." Song Qingshi smiled for him. "I also think it's too noisy here."

He dragged Yue Wuhuan through the opulent liveliness, toward the Nine-Tier Pagoda, one of South Sea City's most famous views. Legend said it housed an immortal's portrait behind lock and key, so no one knew what he looked like.

It was rather quiet there. While a stunning bamboo forest surrounded the pagoda, the view couldn't compete with the Flower Festival's abundant blooms.

Song Qingshi snuck a few glances at a couple hidden in the depths of the bamboo, lost in a kiss neither wanted to break. They whispered sickly sweet nothings between caresses: One said their partner's lips tasted sweet, while the other said their lips were soft.

Yue Wuhuan forced him to turn around, then his vines crept forward with a menacing fearful aura that scared the lovebirds away.

That done, Yue Wuhuan jumped on his sword and flew Song Qingshi to the top of the pagoda. He made sure the area was clean before he used his spiritual senses to confirm that there was no one else around, and finally felt at ease.

The view was indeed very beautiful. On top of the pagoda, the bright moonlight lit up everything, no candles necessary. It was like they were viewing the world from the outside. That winding river of light was the night market, and the tiny, scattered pinpricks of light surrounding it were homes, full of fools and wise men alike.

Song Qingshi didn't want to be wise, but he had no choice…

He unloaded his interspatial bag and gave everything he'd bought to Yue Wuhuan. Most of it was stupid, whatever the merchants' claims, but that was fine. It was the thought that counted, and his thoughts weren't stupid.

Yue Wuhuan couldn't resist. He seized the wooden bird flute and gave it a few blows. The little toy made a melodious noise like a chorus of birds.

Song Qingshi's heart fluttered.

Chapter 56

YUE WUHUAN PUT DOWN the bird flute and smiled at Song Qingshi, bidding him to share his other peculiar purchases.

Song Qingshi hesitated, trying to find his words. Finally, he breathed deep and handed a golden soul lantern to Yue Wuhuan. For too long, he had searched for the desperate, pained sinner now struggling in its flame.

Yue Wuhuan accepted the lantern numbly, waiting for Song Qingshi's explanation.

"I caught him," Song Qingshi said earnestly, gazing into Yue Wuhuan's eyes. "I won't spare anyone who's harmed Wuhuan. Don't worry. I can handle a little killing. I'm ruthless, and my underworld flames are torturous. They won't die easy—and I'll capture their souls afterward, just for you."

That meant Song Qingshi knew. He'd found out about his killings…

Yue Wuhuan scratched his own wrist and tried to focus.

"I don't care about what you've done." Song Qingshi grabbed Yue Wuhuan's hands to stop him from hurting himself. He squeezed tight. "You can tell me what you want. Anything. Give me a list of people. I'll kill everyone on it, down to the last of those animals."

"You won't be able to." Yue Wuhuan smiled and tried to pull his hands back, but Song Qingshi gripped even harder.

"I'll do my best," Song Qingshi insisted.

"You have no idea, Zunzhu. There's too many. Too many to kill," Yue Wuhuan rasped. "Golden Phoenix Mountain's huge. Guests come and go every day. They're not nobodies, either. Those animals I serviced are sect elders, leaders, yuanying and fenshen cultivators. Even dacheng-level masters."

His beauty had been known far and wide, and everyone had wanted a taste. The more he offended Jin Feiren, the greater his humiliation. Anyone could have a go.

Most cultivators had a sect's backing. They protected one another; harming one man incurred the wrath of many. How could they ever kill them all?

"I gave up a long time ago." Yue Wuhuan laughed. "If you get rid of those animals, every one, you'll turn this world into a mountain of bones and a sea of blood. You'll have to destroy everything…"

Even if he was a madman, he knew it was impossible.

"If you want mountains and seas of death, then that's what I'll give you," Song Qingshi said. He held Yue Wuhuan fast. "I'll do my best. As long as I draw breath, I'll keep going. I won't give up!"

"I don't want it. Revenge is just a hobby. I kill if the opportunity presents itself. If it doesn't, I let it go. There's no need to dirty your hands with trash," Yue Wuhuan said, both amused and angry. He pinched Song Qingshi's cheek, hoping to change his stubborn expression. "I've already found something more important."

"What's that?" Song Qingshi asked, surprised.

"Wipe that frown off your face. I like your gifts." Yue Wuhuan blew on the bird flute a second time, hailing a playful pair of cloud sparrows. "The moonlight's so beautiful. Let's do something fun. Math practice or reading, Zunzhu?"

Song Qingshi felt embarrassed. "Wuhuan, you don't have to try to please me all the time. I'm so dull. I never know what other people are thinking, and I'm always making mistakes…"

"I like you that way." Yue Wuhuan chuckled.

Song Qingshi was wonderful—Yue Wuhuan just hoped he never saw his own rotten heart.

The Three Tiger-Fighting Brothers and Yanyuan-xianjun had the same advice: Between men, if you don't know what ails your friend, take him drinking. Once he's had enough, he'll spill.

Song Qingshi presented the jar of Drunken Beauty he'd just purchased to Yue Wuhuan. "Let's drink it all!"

Yue Wuhuan didn't know how to respond.

"It's a South Sea City specialty. It's sweet, flavorful, and they only sell it during the festival!" Song Qingshi parroted the shopkeeper's sales pitch. "I've checked to make sure. This wine's extremely pure. I-I rarely drink, but I'd like to try this!"

Too many misfortunes had befallen them that day. It would be good if Song Qingshi drank a little to cheer up.

Yue Wuhuan ignored his niggling discomfort and brought out a pair of cups. After checking that the wine didn't have any impurities, he filled Song Qingshi's cup.

Drunken Beauty was as sweet and soft as promised. It didn't burn as it traveled down the throat, and even those with inexperienced palates could enjoy it. But it had an unexpectedly high alcohol content.

"Zunzhu, don't drink too much." Yue Wuhuan gestured at his cup. "The full name of this wine is 'A Drunken Beauty Upon the Knee.'"

He'd spoken too late: Song Qingshi had already downed three cups. His face was flushed. He tumbled into Yue Wuhuan's arms and went still.

Yue Wuhuan hadn't expected him to be such a lightweight. He flipped Song Qingshi onto his side, so he could lie in his lap to rest.

Song Qingshi had expected to coax the truth out of him with that kind of tolerance? He was so cute. Yue Wuhuan stroked Song Qingshi's soft hair as though petting a cat.

"Still awake?" Yue Wuhuan asked teasingly, after a while.

Song Qingshi made a whining sound in his throat. "I'm awake."

"Zunzhu, do you have anything you're hiding from me?"

Song Qingshi squinted at his lips. "I'm craving something sweet."

"Is it ice cream?"

He shook his head. “No. Better.”

Yue Wuhuan guessed a few more sweets but Song Qingshi seemed a little muddled and didn’t want to continue answering that question. Yue Wuhuan lay back down, picked up the soul lantern next to them, and prodded the soul inside.

Then he realized Song Qingshi had never asked for any gifts from *him*.

All Song Qingshi had ever asked was for Yue Wuhuan not to harm himself. But Song Qingshi kept giving him gift after gift, while there was only one thing Yue Wuhuan could give in return.

He took the phoenix blood from his interspatial pouch. It dangled on a golden chain engraved with spells, but the incantation wasn’t complete: He wanted to add a fiendishly complicated soul seal, so the gem would follow Song Qingshi in every lifetime. He would wear it like a brand, as a part of him forever.

Yue Wuhuan traced his finger over Song Qingshi’s pale neck, satisfied. It looked best here.

The warm sensation of his finger made Song Qingshi’s neck itch. He wiggled and whined.

Yue Wuhuan withdrew his finger. “Zunzhu, do you have something you want most of all?” he asked tentatively.

Song Qingshi’s reply came as a whisper. “Yes, I do…”

“What do you want? I’ll get it for you.” Visions of research equipment, antiquarian tomes, precious medicines, and little white mice flashed before Yue Wuhuan’s eyes. He couldn’t guess which Song Qingshi would request.

“A song.” Song Qingshi whined, clinging to his leg. “I want to hear Wuhuan’s playing. But…Wuhuan might be sad…so I don’t ever ask for it…”

Song Qingshi loved music. The melody Yue Wuhuan once played on Langgan Stage still drifted through his mind now and again. That was the loveliest song he’d ever heard—and yet the piece sounded too plaintive, too painful. He hadn’t asked to hear it or listened since.

Remembering Golden Phoenix Mountain and Yan Mountain Sect might have proven too nightmarish for Yue Wuhuan.

Yue Wuhuan hadn't anticipated such a wish.

In his interspatial bag, he kept a purple bamboo xiao Song Qingshi purchased for him in Yue City all those years ago. He'd bought it on a whim with a heap of other silly purchases, then handed it all over to Yue Wuhuan. He hadn't considered that Song Qingshi intended the xiao to mean something.

"I don't hate music. I just hate *that* kind of music," Yue Wuhuan said bitterly. At three years old, he had already learned to play his mother's zither, and at five he took qin lessons from the Empress. How could he hate music? He simply didn't like vulgar, chaotic pieces. He didn't play the xiao anymore because he had to be in the right mood, and he had more important business to attend to than playing the xiao.

But he was willing to play if Song Qingshi would listen. He tried a few notes on the purple bamboo xiao.

"I want to see your face." Song Qingshi tugged off Yue Wuhuan's mask, his mood mischievous.

Yue Wuhuan brought the xiao to his lips and played the first few delicate notes of "A Phoenix Seeks His Mate," the song that had played in his heart countless times. In the night, the lingering melody floated around him.

The noisy crows stopped their ceaseless braying, and the returning orioles peeked their heads out. Larks landed at his feet, followed by hwamei and finches. A white crane spread its wings and rose from the pond…

Song Qingshi slowly moved to sit in front of him.

Yue Wuhuan put all of his feelings into the music.

Song Qingshi could perceive some of it—at least a little of what the xiao was asking for. He stared at Yue Wuhuan's red lips, thinking of the obscene books about them and the couple in the bamboo forest. A strange desire welled up inside him. The more he gazed, the more sweetness he imagined, the more hunger he felt.

Yue Wuhuan seemed even tastier than the sweetest of candies. He liked him so much, so very much…

He thought that Yue Wuhuan felt the same way.

The last notes of the song lingered in the air. Yue Wuhuan's lips left the xiao.

Song Qingshi was beaming at him. His intoxicated expression made him look a little lost, and whatever interesting thing he was thinking about was a mystery.

Drawing closer to Yue Wuhuan's chin, Song Qingshi sniffed out his target and chuckled. "Does Wuhuan also want something sweet?"

"Sure," Yue Wuhuan answered easily, though he didn't know what Song Qingshi was implying.

He found out when Song Qingshi grabbed his shoulders and shoved their mouths together.

Yue Wuhuan's eyes widened. He had no idea how to react.

It was an immature, clumsy kiss. Song Qingshi mouthed at him like a puppy just learning to gnaw a bone. He clearly didn't know what he was doing, but he kept trying regardless. He licked Yue Wuhuan with the tip of his tongue until every inch of his lips was wet. He worried at Yue Wuhuan's skin with gentle teeth, wanting to consume him but afraid of hurting him. He pushed, he pulled, he nosed.

In the end, the bone defeated him, and he let out a soft, unsatisfied complaint.

Yue Wuhuan returned to himself, then pushed Song Qingshi away in a panic. He wiped at the wetness on his chin. Unable to clean it to his satisfaction, he fumbled for a handkerchief from his interspatial bag.

"Don't kiss me… Y-you have no idea how many disgusting things my lips have touched. I-I'll dirty you."

"Why do you always say that? You're very clean. Not dirty at all."

"Please, Zunzhu, you don't understand any of this. You're the clean one. Don't touch me…"

Song Qingshi decided talking wouldn't solve anything. He jumped on Yue Wuhuan using the speed and power his cultivation offered him, then took another taste.

Yue Wuhuan couldn't avoid him. He drew a sharp breath.

"You *are* very sweet," Song Qingshi said.

Yue Wuhuan gazed at him in silent shock.

"If you think you're dirty, don't worry. I'll lick you clean." That solution seemed simple enough to Song Qingshi. He leaned in for another kiss.

Yue Wuhuan's breathing quickened. He couldn't think straight, and the chains on his desires loosened. The caged beast in his chest paced and growled.

I'll just have a little taste. Just a little…

His vines surged and formed a net that tightened around Song Qingshi. Yue Wuhuan dragged Song Qingshi close and locked him in his arms. There was no room to back away, and no chance of escape.

"Zunzhu, that's not how you kiss someone. Let me teach you."

Yue Wuhuan pushed his mouth against Song Qingshi's pale pink lips. He forced his tongue past Song Qingshi's teeth, invading that untouched space. Corrupting it. He attacked. His tongue chased hungrily after that wet sweetness—in and out, in and out. He moved like a lively piece of music played by clumsy hands. Finally, he found a suitable tempo.

They became one. They'd never part.

Moist, heavy breaths filled the space between them.

Song Qingshi came to his senses and realized what he'd done.

A therapist could not harbor romantic thoughts toward their patients. It wasn't ethical or professional. He'd never dared think about it, let alone *touch* Yue Wuhuan. What was he doing? What had he done to his patient?

He'd touched something forbidden. This rule shouldn't ever be broken.

This was a serious case of malpractice, a serious incident…

What was he to do?

Song Qingshi clutched Yue Wuhuan. Any retreat only resulted in a fiercer attack. He was dizzy from all the kissing, and it was impossible to think. How could he stop this? What price would he have to pay for forgiveness?

Was the rest of his life enough?

Yue Wuhuan kissed him deeper and deeper. To Yue Wuhuan, the only thing real in this world was the person in his arms. He didn't want to lose this beautiful taste. He couldn't get enough.

A transformed An Long watched them from the darkest recess of the bamboo forest. His eyes were dark red and totally inhuman, with long, vertical slits for pupils. He was like a hellish, emotionless insect from the lowest abyss.

Yue Wuhuan felt his presence and smiled wildly. He continued to kiss Song Qingshi with abandon, despite An Long's terrifying aura.

Yue Wuhuan had been waiting for him. Many things could now come to an end.

His happiness had doubled.

Chapter 57

SONG QINGSHI REALLY HAD a low tolerance for alcohol. Groggily, he fell asleep in Yue Wuhuan's arms.

Yue Wuhuan carried him back to the inn, washed his face, undid his outer robe, and tucked him in. He sat by the bed, silently debating himself for a long time. An inebriated Song Qingshi looked tempting, but he was a handful and tested Yue Wuhuan's self-control. He'd make certain Song Qingshi didn't drink so much in the future.

Song Qingshi slept on.

Suddenly, a few fireflies flashed outside the window. It was a signal.

It seemed a certain someone was ready to show his true self, which meant it was time for another delightful ordeal. Yue Wuhuan fixed his long hair, adjusted his clothes, and followed the fireflies.

The abandoned temple of an old mountain god lay on the outskirts of South Sea City, a hinterland teeming with hideous vermin and venomous snakes. They were ugly and twisted, like they'd been raised in an ancient torture pit filled to the brim with competition. The stench of death hung in the air.

An Long had abandoned Haolong on a barren mountainside when he first showed signs of succumbing to his demonic side, lest it notice the transformation. He sat silent and alone amid the writhing creatures, his bloodred eyes blank.

Yue Wuhuan walked into the terror-sieged temple and stepped into the swarm. Snakes slithered and insects crawled over his legs in wave after painful, stinging wave. He had never experienced a road to hell like this, not even in nightmares, yet he strolled forward as if the temple was a flowering meadow. He felt no fear.

"You're crazy," An Long said, his voice hoarse.

Yue Wuhuan obliged him with a smile. "And you're a half-demon."

Ignoring the vermin that clung to him, he stared in challenge at An Long. Yue Wuhuan was a mere foundation-level cultivator, and the king in the darkness held his life in his hands.

Nothing scared him, not even death. He loved scheming, and he enjoyed gambling for high stakes even more.

An Long knew everything Yue Wuhuan had done in the last ten years. No one had ever been so audacious, so willing to bare his own weakness, to lay trap after trap with his life.

Just when you thought victory was within your grasp, he'd reveal his fangs and strike, leaving you in unbearable pain. The most venomous animal…

"When did you start suspecting my identity?" An Long asked in a low voice. He was so curious about this strange man…

"I thought your relationship with Zunzhu seemed contrived. You drew his attention on purpose, then became his 'friend' by catering to his interests and hobbies. Zunzhu's the quiet type. He never volunteers his own thoughts, and most others have misconceptions about him. How do you know him so well?"

Of course, that was only a small suspicion at first. Coincidences happened all the time; two people who just so happened to be perfect for one another could meet.

But suspicion had punctured a hole in Yue Wuhuan's heart, and it only grew larger and larger over time.

Song Qingshi habitually kept medical records for every one of his patients. Yue Wuhuan had seen them all over the last ten years. Nothing seemed off about them. Nevertheless…

He looked into An Long's past, but it was like he hadn't existed before he joined the Thousand Poison Sect. He had no friends, no parents, or anything else. Because he demonstrated a natural control of insects, he was adopted by the then-Xilin Poison King and became his direct disciple.

Yue Wuhuan came across the records for the half-demon accidentally, sealed and hidden in a corner of Song Qingshi's study, because half-demons were hated creatures.

Song Qingshi's medical records didn't explain his feelings. They only contained cold, hard numbers, including the half-demon's daily medications and the progression of his illness. At the time, Song Qingshi had lacked experience. His treatments were imperfect and his records weren't complete, but it was clear the treatment went on for two years. Day in and day out, the pair were together. It was enough time to learn Song Qingshi had a warm heart under his cold exterior, to understand his interests.

But that wasn't enough.

"How could I connect a lowly, dirty half-demon with the noble, powerful master of the Thousand Poison Sect? What half-demon has ever aspired to such heights?" Yue Wuhuan sneered. "When Zunzhu brought up his time in the temple with the half-demon, you seemed to hate the topic. That's when I knew something was off. He thought it was my nightmare in the heart-devouring array, but I knew it wasn't, which means it could only be yours. Why would the great Poison King's worst memory be a stinking swamp?"

Song Qingshi had met the half-demon in a swamp. An Long's nightmare was in a swamp. Still, that wasn't proof enough.

Without warning, a faint fragrance tickled An Long's nose. He held his breath—but it was too late. The smell flushed out the taint in his blood. His pupils narrowed into slits. An incrustation of black scales grew on his face. His fingers lengthened, and a hard black carapace covered his tattooed arm, like an insect's sharp, jointed limb. Barbs emerged from his spine, followed by a scorpion's heavy, club-like stinger.

"Your true form is just as ugly as I expected," Yue Wuhuan said, awestruck.

"Ensnared Heart? What did you add to it?" An Long asked coldly.

Ensnared Heart wasn't poison. It was an aphrodisiac, particularly effective against half-demons, like realgar against snakes.

An Long's cultivation might normally have suppressed the fragrance's effects, but he was a complete mess today. Under the effects of the fragrance, his emotions and desires had been magnified to the point he couldn't control his own body. What he'd wanted to hide was on full display.

"O high and mighty Xilin Poison King!" Yue Wuhuan spread his arms wide. "Your secret's in my will. Zunzhu, Night Rain Pavilion, Thousand Poison Sect… Kill me, and *everyone* will know."

The immortal realm wouldn't suffer a half-demon to live, much less sit on Xilin's throne. However strong the Poison King was, could he withstand the world's wrath?

Yue Wuhuan was a lunatic with nothing to lose. He feared no torture or death. If An Long struck him down, he would fall too.

An Long made his decision.

He took a deep breath and stood, stooped with murderous intent. "He would never fall for you."

"You want to kill me even if you stand to lose everything? I never thought you could love Zunzhu this deeply, to the point of losing yourself." Yue Wuhuan's bewitching smile disappeared as quickly as it came, revealing a madman's terrifying calm. His vines fanned out as one as he pulled out his sword.

"If that's the case…" Yue Wuhuan continued, his voice harsh. "Why did you kill him on Golden Phoenix Mountain?!"

An Long's aura grew more murderous.

"How did you know?" he asked after far too long.

It seemed obvious the moment he said it. Yue Wuhuan was the mortal slave who had been with Guiyuan-xianzun. At the time, all An Long knew was that he'd made a mistake. He just barely noticed Guiyuan-xianzun and some slave spying through the chaos of his thoughts. He killed Guiyuan-xianzun and massacred Cantong Sect to hush it up later, but he never found that slave, whose blindfolded face remained unknown to him.

There were too many slaves in Golden Phoenix Mountain to bother with, and none of them had the ability to sense what he'd done from that distance. So he let it go, once he ensured Guiyuan-xianzun's silence.

But of course that incident remained like a thorn in his heart—his deepest pain.

"Let me guess." Yue Wuhuan strolled toward him, smiling. "Did you confess to Zunzhu? And when he rejected you, did the fury and the desire to kill in your half-demon blood boil to the surface? You accidentally killed Song Qingshi, didn't you? You suspected that Guiyuan-xianzun saw your half-demon form, so you had to kill him too."

"No," An Long whispered, almost to himself. "I don't know what happened. I was confused. He was dead when I woke up."

Yue Wuhuan drew closer. "Yes. You lost control. Your bugs killed him."

"He didn't die!" An Long howled.

"I watched him stop breathing with my own eyes. You assumed he was dead. You put him in his favorite medicine garden, didn't you?" Yue Wuhuan's face was full of grief. "Poor Zunzhu. His body showed no signs of a struggle. He never thought his 'good friend' could do something like that. He never had a chance."

"I don't remember." An Long's head ached. "But he didn't die. He came back…"

"He came back to life because he was lucky, not because you were merciful," Yue Wuhuan said, consoled by this one thing.

An Long gasped for air. "Qingshi forgave me."

"He forgave you?" Yue Wuhuan cackled, like this was the funniest joke he'd ever heard. He felt like a demon watching a fool consign his soul to hell, all without lifting a finger.

Terror washed over An Long. He had let it go too far. He had to kill this man so he didn't have to face the truth—but it was already too late.

Yue Wuhuan delivered the cruelest truth in the gentlest tone: "Zunzhu doesn't know that you killed him. He forgot."

“That’s impossible,” An Long hissed. “That bug doesn’t affect the mind!”

“He lost some memories, after an unfortunate accident with his soul.” Yue Wuhuan almost seemed to pity him. “Did he ever say what he forgave? What happened that day? Don’t be stupid. How could anyone forgive their own murderer?”

An Long stumbled backward. Pain lanced through his head.

He’d been out of control the moment he saw Song Qingshi. He remembered confessing, begging for even a bit of sympathy, but Song Qingshi had coldly rejected him. Then he sank into fury and despair. He lost himself. When he came to his senses, Song Qingshi had already fallen to his bugs.

He lost his composure and fled Golden Phoenix Mountain in a panic. He only recovered somewhat once he knew Song Qingshi still lived. He didn’t dare beg forgiveness for such a grave mistake. For several days he watched himself at a distance, like a walking corpse.

Then he received Song Qingshi’s letter, with its usual contents: how he’d solved a difficult problem. He made no mention of that day’s events, like it hadn’t troubled him.

Song Qingshi allowed him to visit the Medicine King’s Valley.

Song Qingshi said he forgave him with a smile.

Song Qingshi never mentioned it again.

The ecstasy of regaining everything he’d lost took him to the brink of madness. He cast that day from his mind, erased every trace like an ostrich burying its head in the sand.

Secretly, he was actually a little glad. Qingshi knew about his feelings and still forgave his crime. Did An Long occupy a unique space in his heart? Did that mean he felt something for him?

The night Song Qingshi knocked on An Long’s door wearing only a single robe, An Long had been nearly sick with joy. He thought Song Qingshi was there to say yes.

Although it had been a misunderstanding, An Long was just glad they were still friends.

To atone for his crime, he would do anything. He would endure any sharp blade in his heart. He bore it without complaint.

His half-demon inheritance meant he had a powerful desire to kill, stronger than most. Besides Yue Wuhuan, nobody had ever survived challenging him.

An Long had throttled his urges again and again, allowing the pitiful little mortal to live despite his fury. If he made another mistake, he'd lose everything. He knew that.

It turned out he'd already made the mistake.

It turned out he'd never been forgiven.

An Long clutched his head in agony. The effects of the Ensnared Heart were worsening. A harsh buzz filled his ears. The hallucinations were about to return.

"Let Zunzhu go, will you?" Yue Wuhuan approached him slowly, pleading with his beautiful eyes. His voice quavered, fragile and meek. "I'd never hurt him. I just want to enjoy a quiet, peaceful life with him in the Medicine King's Valley. Please, let us have this."

Tendrils of the bloodking vine crept out of the dark. Their prey had reached a breaking point. They approached, ready with the poison Yue Wuhuan had prepared.

"You've already hurt him. He won't forgive you." Yue Wuhuan's cruel words pierced An Long's innermost heart and soul. "Are you so shameless you think you can go back? So brazen you think you can be friends? You really believe he forgives you, that you have a claim on his heart?"

He levied his sword. A blue, poisonous glow covered the blade.

"Stop," An Long gasped. "Stop talking…"

"Ridiculous. How do you atone for killing the one you love most?" Yue Wuhuan tutted, his voice full of pity. "How about…you admit your guilt in hell?"

Even before he finished speaking, his sword moved with a dragon's speed. The vines struck An Long's weak spot at the same time.

An impenetrable shield of scales blocked the deadly attack.

“Ah, that troublesome demonic half,” Yue Wuhuan sneered. He retreated and readied for another strike.

Even if he disrupted An Long’s mental defenses and only attacked his weak spots, Yue Wuhuan wasn’t strong enough to pierce the protections of a half-demon yuanying cultivator. It was almost impossible.

An Long knelt. He couldn’t think over the noise in his mind. Without his direction, the swarming insects attacked each other and every living thing nearby indiscriminately.

Yue Wuhuan might not have an opportunity this good ever again. His vines swatted incoming bugs, but those that made it through his defenses could bite as they pleased. He’d taken a medicine that would delay the effects of any poison. Then he cracked open a bamboo tube and released the poisonous Black Death Butterflies. Their toxins spread through skin contact, and his vines had already marked their prey.

He tossed out a spirit talisman. Chained arrays circled the temple, cutting off An Long’s potential escape routes.

The black butterflies flew out of the bamboo and advanced on their enemy, ready to claim him for the abyss.

Yue Wuhuan smiled, satisfied, anticipating his long-awaited relief.

“Qingshi cultivates emptiness,” An Long said, staring at the cloud of butterflies.

Yue Wuhuan paused as though stunned, before his smile grew brighter. “That’s perfect for me.”

So the plan had hit a few snags—he’d fix it somehow.

He’d never wanted Song Qingshi to feel desire.

“Maniac!” An Long cursed. He stood up. Waves of black, demonic energy rolled off him. His stinger arrowed toward the wall of arrays.

A sudden thunderclap shook the sky…

Lightning snaked after it, dancing. A violent bolt smashed through the roof of the temple and broke the array, throwing them apart. Torrential rain poured from the sky,

dousing everything. The raindrops slammed into the black butterflies, halting their attack.

At this sudden change, Yue Wuhuan looked up in astonishment. He couldn't comprehend it; yet again, fate's cruel hand tossed him wherever it pleased.

An Long fled into the sheeting rain. His vermin followed.

With his fight interrupted, Yue Wuhuan couldn't achieve his goal.

"Why? Why? Why?"

Yue Wuhuan was furious. His vines rampaged through the temple, swatting at the rain, at the ruins, at whatever they could reach. He felled trees and smashed boulders. He wished he could destroy the whole world.

Rain blurred his vision. He was drenched, and everything stank.

He hated the world down to his bones.

An Long staggered into the forest and threw himself in the mud.

The voices in his head raged. He could no longer think or fight.

Despair. Who cares if you crawled out of the mud and into a position that equals his?

Despair. He'd rather die than have you.

Despair. What a flimsy disguise. Hideous. Vile. That's the real you.

Despair. He never forgave you.

An Long listened in a daze. He saw flashes of the past: the youth that carried him out of the swamp, covering his soiled form with a fragrant white outer robe. He bore him away, cleaned his festering wounds, cured his poisoning, and healed him—then sent him away.

At the time, An Long was young. He didn't understand the full force of his emotion, only that he felt angry, furious, and resentful.

But he remembered. An Long thought of Song Qingshi every day.

When they next met in a secret realm, he threw a hideous insect in his path, hoping to provoke his anger. The young man picked up the bug and studied it for a while. He approached An Long, smiling.

"This little guy's adorable."

He knew exactly what he felt, then.

He played dumb, caused trouble, and demanded his attention. He crept among unsuspecting sheep and clawed his way to the top, just so they stood eye to eye.

He couldn't let go even after he found out Song Qingshi cultivated emptiness and despaired.

He would lie, if he had to—to the world, to Song Qingshi, and even to himself—but he'd failed. It was finished. He was done.

Maggots had to return to the earth sooner or later.

Despair. Reject humanity. Become the demon you were meant to be.

"What are you?"

Your destiny.

Chapter 58

THUNDER ROARED while torrential rain pounded the broken rooftop, like war drums.

The noise startled Song Qingshi awake. His head spun as he examined his patchy recollection of the evening before. It felt like his lips were a little sore and swollen. He struggled to keep the lattice of cracks in his yuanying from spreading.

Sitting on the bed, he racked his brain. They'd gone to the Nine-Tier Pagoda to admire the lights… He'd invited Yue Wuhuan to enjoy some Drunken Beauty… After the wine, Yue Wuhuan had played a very pretty tune. And then he'd forced a kiss on Wuhuan while drunk, like a beast! He'd kissed him several times, because Yue Wuhuan was no match against Song Qingshi's cultivation!

What kind of scummy behavior was that?!

Song Qingshi panicked. He wanted to hide. First, he'd dig a hole, huddle in it, and cover it. Eighteen layers seemed sufficient.

He heard Yue Wuhuan's footsteps from outside. Every footfall sounded like a death sentence. If he got on his knees and apologized, could he get away with slightly less dirt?

Yue Wuhuan pushed open the door and walked in. Mud and blood dribbled off him.

Song Qingshi took a deep breath, ready to apologize, but he smelled blood instead. Last night's awkwardness didn't matter if something had happened to Yue Wuhuan. He threw open the bed curtains, leaped up, and rushed to Yue Wuhuan. He was totally drenched, covered in muck, and a few loose strands of hair clung to his mask, icy cold and dripping.

"What happened?" Song Qingshi asked.

Yue Wuhuan looked at his swollen lips. There was no color left in his eyes.

Song Qingshi tried again. Again, Yue Wuhuan didn't respond. Cultivators couldn't catch colds, but he would still feel uncomfortable. Song Qingshi took out his handkerchief and blotted some of the wetness, then offered a change of clothes.

He hesitated before asking. "Can you undress yourself?"

Yue Wuhuan came to his senses. He took off the mask, untied his belt, and peeled off his wet robes layer by layer, revealing masses of stings and bites—none particularly serious, but they covered every inch of skin, especially his slender, graceful legs. Shockingly purple, blue, and red wounds marred the skin, all of them oozing venom.

Song Qingshi knew An Long's work when he saw it. His expression warped with fury, but he pressed the anger down and tried to remain calm.

Yue Wuhuan had at least used an antidote pill to control the spread. Song Qingshi extracted what he could with his flames of the underworld, but An Long's research into venomous bugs had reached depths Song Qingshi's had not. Some of them had unique, lasting effects, like mycotoxins. The underworld flame couldn't alleviate them; he'd have to treat it over time with courses of medicine.

He had helped develop these venoms. Song Qingshi's chest ached.

He cleaned Yue Wuhuan's wounds before he spread a thick layer of ointment over them, then wrapped them up in layers of gauze.

The thunder had stopped, but that maddening rain continued. The air in the room was as oppressive and heavy as the atmosphere outside.

Song Qingshi finally finished. He looked up from his work. "I'm sorry."

Yue Wuhuan froze.

"It was my fault. I shouldn't have made you guys travel together," Song Qingshi explained with difficulty. "Honestly, I should've known. Can you just get over hating someone? People who don't get along should stay apart… I'll give An Long a good talking-to, then take you home. From now on, he's not allowed to see you. The valley will turn him away. Written communications only."

Novels lied. Enemies couldn't become friends in real life. That was his own wishful thinking.

Song Qingshi retreated into his regret. He cursed himself, but he didn't know that many swear words. None of them seemed fierce enough.

Yue Wuhuan's phoenix eyes looked down.

"Zunzhu," he said, "I have something very important to tell you."

Song Qingshi sat and stared at the pale dawn, lost in thought. Though the worst of the rain had stopped, it seemed interminably drizzly, and dark clouds still roiled in the sky. A deep, uncomfortable humidity had seeped into every corner of the room.

He felt as though he had just woken from a strange dream.

Yue Wuhuan had told him what'd happened from beginning to end. Now he waited for Song Qingshi's decision.

Song Qingshi closed his eyes and searched his body for old injuries with his spiritual senses. After a while, he located the offending bug's small, fleshy carapace lodged in his brain. He hadn't felt it: It didn't hurt or itch. He never would have known.

It had nearly killed him.

If the system hadn't made him whole, if it hadn't sought a far-flung fragment of his soul in a different world, he would've died.

"I don't remember." Song Qingshi held one hand to his forehead and held the bug's corpse in the other. Even trying to recall things hurt. "His feelings toward me. What he did to me. Anything that happened."

"Don't be sad, Zunzhu. He took advantage of your friendship to attack when you least expected it."

A beautiful black lotus blossomed in Song Qingshi's palm. The flames of the underworld.

“Wuhuan, don’t you remember?” Song Qingshi cupped his hand around the lotus. “This preemptively parries attacks meant to kill me. An Long doesn’t know that.”

He would know if An Long had intended to kill him. He would have burned the bug before it reached his brain. A fight between two yuanying-level cultivators would have leveled the entire mountain.

But he’d been murdered without a fuss.

How?

Yue Wuhuan felt uneasy. Things had slipped out of his control.

“I don’t remember what happened then, but once I extracted the bug… I remembered what I felt just before dying. I wasn’t angry or bitter.” Song Qingshi thought this was all very ironic, but he couldn’t laugh. His voice was small and still. “I think I wanted to die, Wuhuan.”

“Shut up! That’s impossible!” Yue Wuhuan squeezed his shoulder, horrified. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” Song Qingshi said, aggrieved. He couldn’t recall the scene no matter what he did. “Even if he didn’t think of me as his friend, I can’t lie to myself or let him go on pretending. I couldn’t give him what he wanted, then, but…I could give him my life. Because it wasn’t important. No one would mourn me.”

He formulated medicines by himself, read by himself, researched by himself, stared at the clouds by himself… It made no difference to others if he lived or died. No one would care.

His soul, lost in another world, had been in a worse state. Its deprivation caused him to develop an incurable illness, at no end of sorrow for his family. They forced themselves to smile for his sake. How could they bear it? His parents cried in private, and the burden weighed on his sister too. She gave up her dream for him. He tried to be strong, he tried not to care, but it was hard knowing the only way for his family to escape the pain and find happiness again was for him to die.

No one needed him to live. No one.

Yue Wuhuan was stunned. He never thought that Song Qingshi, who always encouraged him so gently, could harbor such thoughts.

For the first time, he realized he didn't understand this man who seemed so untroubled.

I-impossible. Yue Wuhuan started to panic. The situation was slipping out of his hands.

"Don't worry. It's all in the past. You're here, now." Song Qingshi hurried to console him, sensing his distress. "I set a goal for myself after I met you. I want to stay with you. I'll never be so foolish, never again."

"You're not a fool." Yue Wuhuan's breath rattled even as he stiffly soothed Song Qingshi.

"I really am, though. Looking back, An Long's feelings seem apparent. I just invented reasons to convince myself otherwise. I tried not to notice." Song Qingshi felt worse the more he thought about it and continued his apology. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. I was just…jealous. Other people shop with their friends, go to festivals together. They argue for stupid reasons and laugh about it later. I did exactly what he wanted. I ignored all the signs."

His poisonous innate fire kept people at a distance. No one approached him. No one dared speak to him. No one wanted to be his friend.

He had been too weak in that other world. People never got too close—they would have to take responsibility for whatever happened to him. No one had ever asked him to see a movie, shop, visit an internet café, hang out, play ball…and the few times someone who didn't know tried to get closer, his lack of social skills put them off. He learned to stop hoping.

"You're not a fool," Yue Wuhuan repeated dully. His clever tongue had tied itself into knots.

"Don't worry, I'll stop talking about such sad things." Song Qingshi grinned to mollify him. "To be honest, I've always known I was like this. Who would be friends

with someone like me?"

A flood of tears poured from his eyes, even as he tried to smile.

"What's this?" Song Qingshi wasn't sure why he was crying. He scrubbed his smiling face. "It's okay. I'm not sad. I'm not sad at all. Don't worry, please—"

Suddenly, he stopped talking.

He finally understood what he felt—but the feeling defied logic. He didn't want it.

He was strong, he didn't fear pain, and he wouldn't burden others with problems he could solve himself.

Song Qingshi lowered his head. He hated for someone to see him at his weakest.

"Sorry." Yue Wuhuan gave in. He pulled the crying man into his arms. Song Qingshi's guttural sobs pierced his very soul and his tears soaked Yue Wuhuan's robe, adding to his misery. He stroked Song Qingshi's shaking back. "I shouldn't have made you sad."

"You did nothing wrong," Song Qingshi said in a low voice. "The truth won't go away just because I didn't want to see it."

He would continue to be strong, but at the moment he didn't feel that way.

"Wuhuan, would you let me have some time to cry?"

"Of course. I'll stay with you. I'll always stay with you."

"Wuhuan, aren't I ridiculous?"

"No. And you'll never be."

The clouds slowly dispersed, and the rain stopped. The sun revealed itself again.

If he failed, he'd review what went wrong. If he failed, he'd start over.

If he dwelled on his sadness, he'd miss all the beautiful scenery out there.

Song Qingshi took a long time to exhaust his tears and calm down. He stood.

Yue Wuhuan frowned at him.

"I'm fine now," he said firmly, though he still felt sad. "I made a mistake, so I need to fix it. I don't feel that way about An Long, so I can't give him what he wants. But I can't forgive him, either. So… I won't contact him again."

Yue Wuhuan fell silent.

He'd uncovered the wolf in their midst and chased him away for good. Never again would he endanger Song Qingshi. They could return to the Medicine King's Valley and live in peace.

Why couldn't he smile? He should rejoice.

He almost wanted to call it off, to seize the web he'd woven for so long and rip it to pieces.

"I'll be better to you, from here on out," Yue Wuhuan said. He couldn't resist. "I won't let you cry."

Song Qingshi looked up in surprise.

"I'll go to festivals with you. We'll go shopping. We'll have adventures. Whatever sounds interesting, we'll do it." He hardly understood his own words. He hadn't planned this—his heart and his mouth ran on of their own accord, swearing promise after promise. "Let's do everything you like together. We'll watch clouds, read, experiment, travel, play music, hang out… You'll never be alone again."

Song Qingshi stared at him. His vision blurred again.

Something in his yuanying hurt, but he didn't care.

Yue Wuhuan wiped away his tears. "Don't be sad. You deserve the best."

He would give Song Qingshi flawless gems, lush flowers, the perfect partner. He would ensure his happiness, keep him far from worry, and chase away the pain for good…

"You once said you felt the same way about me as An Long." Song Qingshi couldn't help but smile. He touched his own swollen lips. Abruptly, last night's chaotic,

crazed kisses came back to him. Afraid of more misunderstandings, he asked carefully, “If An Long never saw me as a friend, what about you?”

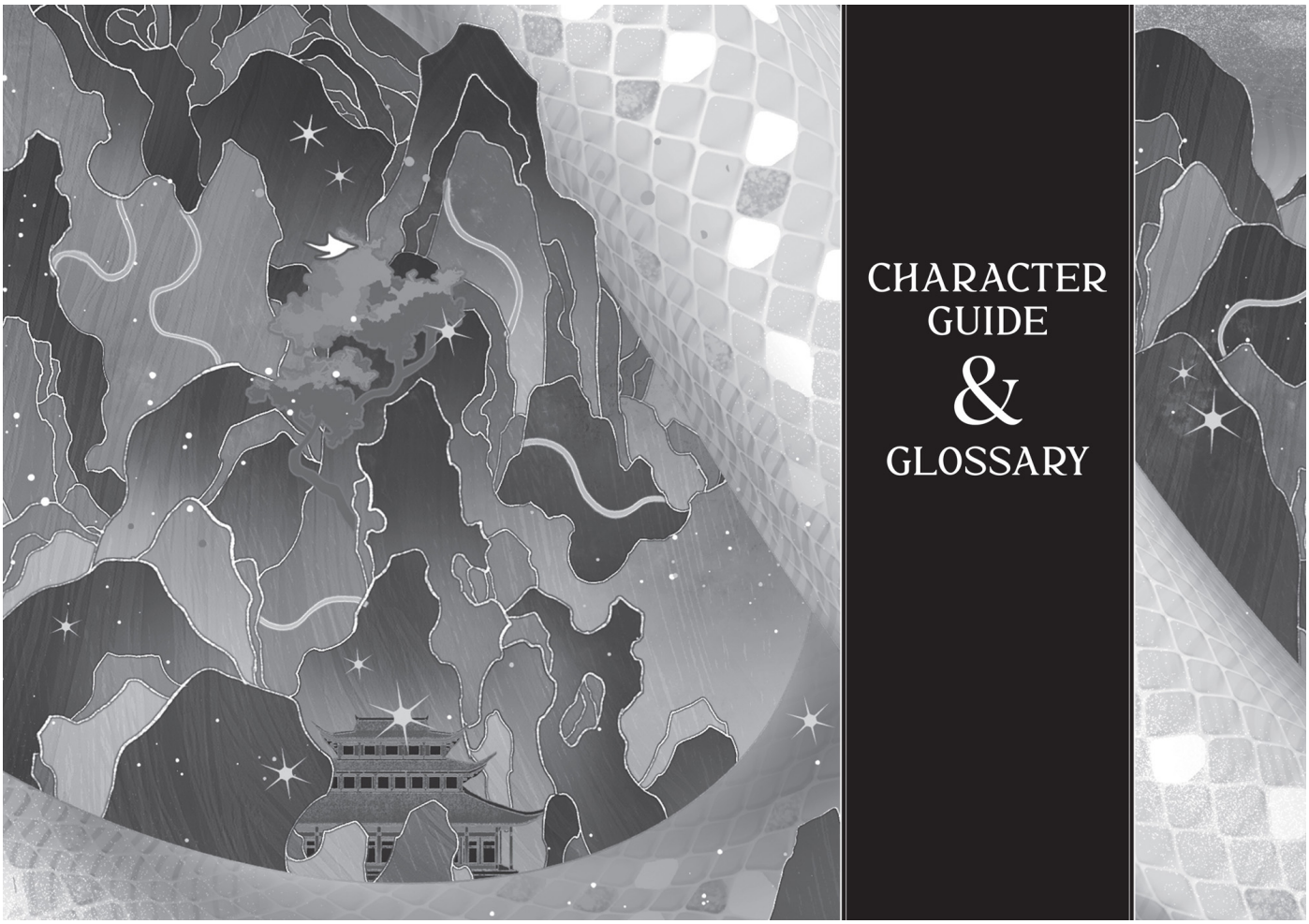
Yue Wuhuan started, remembering his frenzied terror, his irrepressible desires.

“Wuhuan,” Song Qingshi said, seriously. “Are you my friend, or something else?”

Yue Wuhuan stiffened.

Each word of that simple question punched through the wall around his heart. It was like he stood on the edge of his own grave, listening to his own death knell.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN
Mistakenly Saving the Villain
VOLUME 3



CHARACTER GUIDE & GLOSSARY

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

SONG QINGSHI 宋清时 (QINGSHI: "PEACEFUL TIMES"): A medical student who died from ALS, only to be transmigrated to a novel where he was tasked by the mysterious System to save the main character from a tragic fate.

YUE WUHUAN 越无欢 (WUHUAN: "ABSENCE OF JOY"): A royal prince who was taken from the mortal realm under false pretenses and enslaved. Song Qingshi mistakes him for the main character in need of rescue.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

AN LONG 安龙: A man who appears to be Song Qingshi's only friend. The master of the Thousand Poison Sect.

BAI ZIHAO 白子皓: A young man currently favored by Jin Feiren, Yue Wuhuan's former owner.

HAOLONG/XIAOBAI 皓龙/小白: An Long's pet snake. Song Qingshi once saved its life, but because he refused to keep it as a pet, An Long became its owner instead.

JIN FEIREN 金斐韧: The sadistic, wealthy master of Golden Phoenix Mountain. Yue Wuhuan's former owner.

MO YUAN 墨渊: A legendary mortal referred to as the "sword master" who cultivated to the yuanying level and created a new style of swordplay.

QINGLUAN 青鸾: A serious young woman raised by Xie Que, the cultivator who enslaved Yue Wuhuan. Now serves Yue Wuhuan loyally and helps run the Medicine King's Valley.

RONGYE 荣烨: A lazy young man raised by Xie Que, the cultivator who enslaved Yue Wuhuan. Now one of the Medicine King Valley's students.

XIE QUE 谢缺: A cultivator who seeks out beautiful mortal children to train as cultivators until he sells them as slaves. Eliminated by Song Qingshi.

YE LIN 叶霖: The master of the Night Rain Pavilion, an establishment that posts bounties and sells secrets and information.

NAME GUIDE

NAMES, HONORIFICS, AND TITLES

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

-ER: Affectionate diminutive. A suffix meaning "son" or "child." Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a disyllabic name.

XIAO-: A prefix meaning "little" or "younger," which can be added before names or titles for juniors, like "xiaodi." Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

DA-: A prefix meaning "big" or "elder," which can be added before titles for elders, like "dage," or before a name.

Family

GE/GEGE: A word meaning "elder brother." It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

JIE/JIEJIE: A word meaning "elder sister." It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

DI/DIDI: A word meaning "younger brother." It can also be used to address an unrelated younger male, and optionally used as a suffix.

Cultivation and Tutelage

XIANZUN/XIANJUN: A respectful way to refer to another cultivator.

XIANZHANG: A respectful way to refer to another cultivator.

SHIXIONG/SHIJIE: One's older peer. Shixiong is one's older brother, while Shijie is one's older sister.

ZHENREN: A title for Daoist masters.

ZUNZHU: A respectful term of address for the master of a sect, estate, etc.

Other

GONGZI: Title for young men, especially those of high status.

GLOSSARY

ACUPOINTS: Specific spots on the meridians of the body that are said to stimulate the central nervous system in various ways.

CULTIVATION/CULTIVATORS: Cultivation is the means by which mortals with spiritual aptitude develop and harness supernatural abilities. The practitioners of these methods are called cultivators. The path of one's cultivation is a concept that draws heavily from Daoist traditions.

There are different stages of cultivation, often differing between books. The ones for *Mistakenly Saving the Villain* are:

Qi Gathering: The beginner stage when the cultivator collects spiritual energy from the environment around them.

Foundation Establishment: The next stage of cultivation. The cultivator cycles spiritual energy and develops their strength.

Core Formation: The stage when the cultivator forms a golden core and stops aging.

Yuanying: A powerful stage beyond core formation. This is Song Qingshi's level.

Fenshen: A greater level of cultivation that is rarely reached.

Heti: An even greater level of cultivation.

Dacheng: An extremely rare, transcendent level of cultivation, approaching true immortality.

CULTIVATION OF EMPTINESS: Also known as the heartless path. Cultivation based on an absence of love. Theoretically allows one to focus on cultivation free of any emotional attachments.

DANTIAN: Concentrations of spiritual power within the body.

DEMONIC CULTIVATOR: Evil cultivators who do not follow the same moral codes and practices that orthodox cultivators do.

DUAL CULTIVATION: A cultivation technique involving sex between participants meant to improve cultivation ability. Can also be used as a simple euphemism for sex.

HEART OF CULTIVATION: The focus of a cultivator's practice. Examples include cultivation of the sword or cultivation of emptiness. Also known as the path of cultivation.

MERIDIANS: The means by which qi travels through the body, like a magical bloodstream.

PILLS AND ELIXIRS: Medicines created by cultivators either using their spiritual powers, plants that have magical properties, or both.

SPIRIT BEAST: Animals with spiritual powers who often have higher intelligence but are not human or humanlike.

THE FIVE ELEMENTS: The five elements—metal, wood, water, fire, and earth—make up everything in the universe. A person's cultivation can also have a specific elemental attribute, and each element has different qualities (e.g. wood elementals have superior healing).

THE FIVE POISONS: Five deadly creatures treated as symbols of evil: snakes, scorpions, centipedes, toads, and spiders.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE (TCM): A holistic system of medicine used throughout most of Chinese history. Herbal and animal byproducts were boiled into decoctions or ground and applied as a poultice to treat injuries.

XIANXIA: A genre related to wuxia that places more emphasis on the supernatural. Some xianxia works focus on immortal beings such as gods or demons, whereas others are concerned with the conflicts of mortals who practice cultivation. In the latter case, characters strive to become stronger by harnessing their spiritual powers, and some aim to extend their lifespan or achieve immortality.

YAO: Animals and other creatures that have cultivated a human form.

YIN ENERGY AND YANG ENERGY: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy that describes the complementary interdependence of opposite/contrary forces. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy may do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish themselves of whichever energy they lack.

About the Author

Feng Yu Nie is a signed Jinjiang author whose most famous works include *Mistakenly Saving the Villain* and *Shizun*. She's a human being who loves life and spends a lowkey time on earth, appreciating cats, dogs, hamsters, little birds, traveling, good food, and sleeping in.

Footnotes

Chapter 36

[1] Yue Lao is the god of love and marriage in Chinese mythology.

Chapter 40

[2] A strategy game played with black and white stones on a gridded board, also known as Go.

Chapter 41

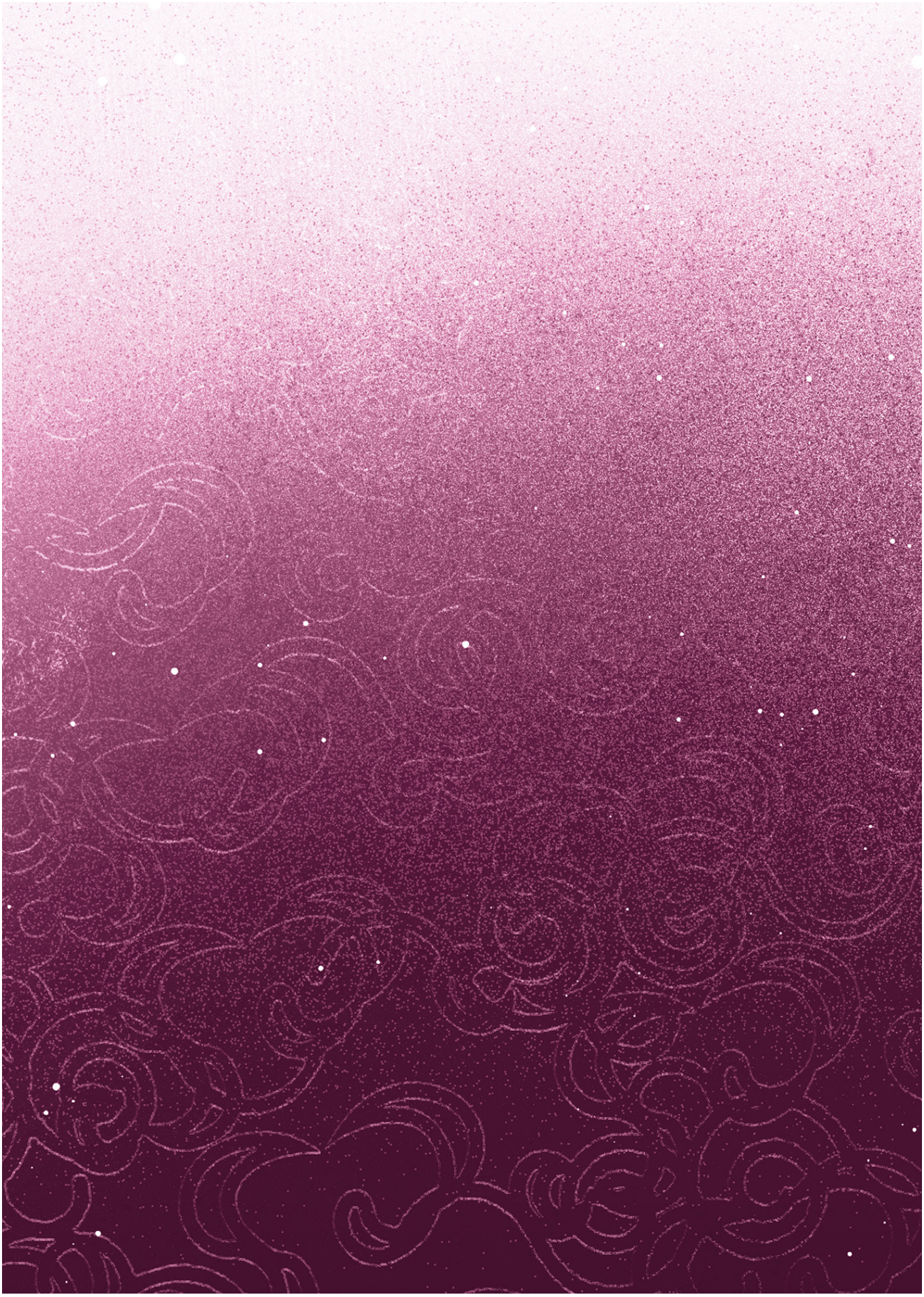
[3] Didi is a term of address for a younger male, meaning younger brother.

[4] Xiao is a prefix meaning “little” or “younger.” It can be added before names or titles. For example, “xiaodi” means “little didi.”

[5] Da is a prefix meaning “big,” “elder,” or “oldest.” It can be added before names or titles. For example, “dage” means the “older (or oldest) gege.”

Chapter 45

[6] Ruqun describes a jacket and skirt combination commonly worn in ancient China. A set of ruqun can be made up of different combinations of tops and bottoms, so it is a generic term used to refer to historical Chinese clothing.



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Does Time Really Heal All Wounds?

After a near-fatal catastrophe, Song Qingshi awakens to find his home, the Medicine King's Valley, almost unrecognizable. But not to fear. His devoted companion, Yue Wuhuan, remains by his side, ready to guide him through the changes.

Yue Wuhuan seems transformed as well. There are rumors that he's become a ruined beauty and a madman, but he insists it's all an act. To Song Qingshi, he seems more stable than ever before. Yet when the volatile and injured An Long storms into the valley, Yue Wuhuan's carefully spun narrative begins to unravel. Soon, the two are at each other's throats again.

In a desperate bid to restore peace, Song Qingshi proposes a vacation together. But beneath the surface of this idyllic escape, Yue Wuhuan is still scheming—determined to eliminate anyone who dares sully his beloved "Zunzhu." And if An Long thinks he can stop him, he's about to learn just how far Yue Wuhuan will go for love.

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